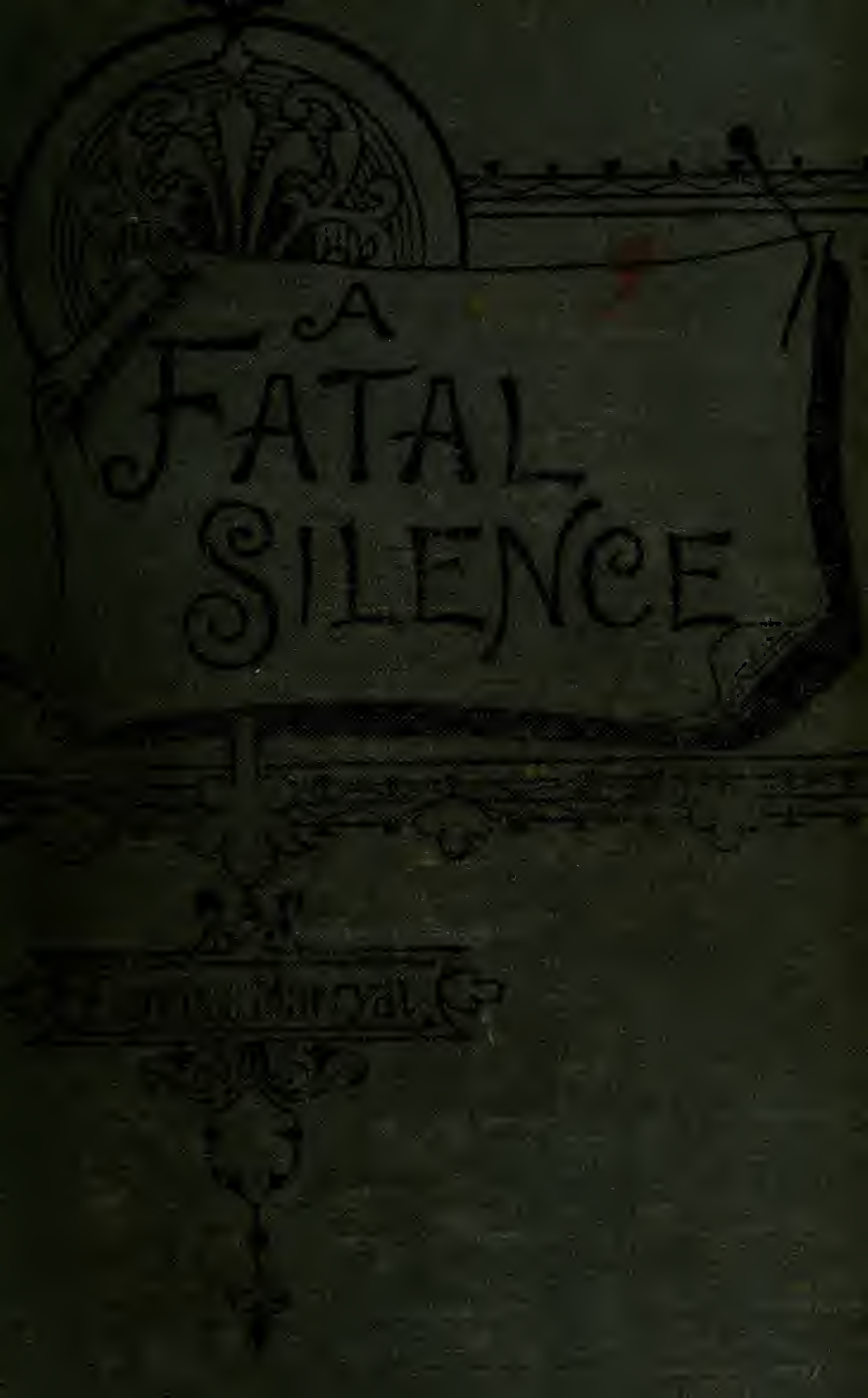
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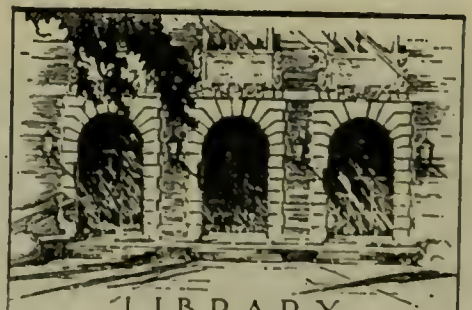

A FATAL SILENCE

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BY

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'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' 'VÉRONIQUE,' ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CHAPTER I.

AN UNWELCOME MEETING.

MARKET day at Haltham, and the primitive little town in an uproar. Huge oxen, with shaggy coats and wide-spreading horns, were being driven along the road, and floundering in their dismay against any luckless passenger that crossed their path. Meek sheep, with their lambs trotting by their side and all baa-ing in concert, followed after, whilst ducks and geese quacked and hissed, and the ploughboys and farming maidens shouted at each other with scarcely less discordant noise.

Miss Stafford was glad to be above it all.

She stood on the rustic pathway, which was

raised several feet above the road, and was protected by stout green posts connected by iron chains, on which the country children loved to swing. Lottie and Carrie Gribble, who had been left in her charge, had run into the very midst of the excitement, and she looked as concerned as a hen whose foster ducklings have taken to the water as she drew her dainty cambric skirts closely around her, to prevent contact with the dirty crowd, and called to them to return to her side. Market day was the one great event of the week to the inhabitants of Haltham, but Miss Stafford came from the neighbouring village of Deepdale, seven miles off, and was not used to so much bustle. She looked annoyed as she was elbowed and pushed by farming men and market women eager to reach their stalls, or to inspect the tempting array of articles exhibited in the shop windows for their benefit. There was only one shop of each kind in Haltham, so that the spirit of competition did not run high. Mr Spring, the stationer, was standing at his door, rubbing his hands and smiling, as Miss Stafford

called to the Gribble girls. He knew her well. She was the certificated schoolmistress of Deepdale, and all the slates and copy books and pens and ink for the use of the school were bought at his shop.

'Ah, Miss Stafford,' he exclaimed, 'anything in my line to-day? I have just received the choicest selection of hymn books. Won't you step in and look at them?'

'In a moment, Mr Spring — indeed, I have a long list for you. But I must wait for Lottie and Carrie Gribble. They are very naughty. They have run right across the road. And you know how very particular Mrs Gribble is.'

Mr Spring lifted his hands and eyes as though to intimate that no one knew it better than himself, but at that moment quite a little crowd entered his shop, where he sold all sorts of fancy articles, and he was compelled to go and attend to them. Presently, Miss Stafford, having recaptured the children, two ugly little animals of eight and ten, followed in his wake, and took her stand by the counter till he could attend to

her. She looked singularly interesting as she did so, and very different in appearance from those around her. Indeed, she was more than interesting, she was a very handsome young woman of about five-and-twenty, but she seemed to have taken great pains to conceal her beauty. She could not hide her soft, white skin, nor her long-fringed, dark-blue eyes, but her mass of reddish-brown hair was strained off her face in a most unbecoming manner, and tucked away at the back of her head, and she wore a coarse straw bonnet which almost concealed her features. Her slight figure was plainly draped in a lilac cambric gown, covered with a summer shawl; but there was an unmistakable air of refinement about her —to those who knew how to read the signs—that her dowdy attire had no power to take away, and which made it difficult to believe that she was only a village schoolmistress. *Some* people in Deepdale (but they were mostly women) thought that Mr Gribble and Mr Axworthy (who were the churchwardens of the place) had not acted with their usual discretion in engaging Miss Staf-

ford to superintend the education of the rising generation. They considered she was too young, and—well, certainly not too *pretty*, for they saw nothing at all in her—but too flighty and 'wool-gathering' to hold so responsible a position, and they prophesied that no good would come of it. So far the flightiness had not been apparent, but Miss Stafford's thoughts certainly seemed to be oftener away from her work than interested in it. She toiled through the monotonous routine day after day with unswerving fidelity, but she had a dreamy and abstracted air that looked as if her heart and head did not go hand in hand. Her beautiful eyes were very sad too, and there was an unaccountably pathetic droop at the corners of her mouth — unaccountable, that is, to the matrons who were set over her and watched her so closely. What, indeed, could anyone wish for more than Miss Stafford possessed? A most excellent and responsible position, mistress of Deepdale school, with three rooms all to herself under the same roof, gas and water free, and sixty pounds a year. Why, it was a little fortune in

itself, and many excellent *Christian* women would be thankful for it. And when the married ladies of Deepdale said 'Christian,' they emphasised the word to such a degree that anyone would have thought that Miss Stafford was a heathen. However, she had obtained the appointment, and held it, and here she was at Mr Spring's counter with a list of school necessaries in her hand.

'And what may be your pleasure, miss?' asked Mr Spring as she approached him.

'Oh, I want so many things, Mr Spring, I think I had better wait till you have served your other customers. There is no hurry. I will look over some of these picture books till you are more at leisure.'

'Teacher! teacher!' cried Carrie Gribble, tugging at her sleeve, 'get us some of them ciphering books with red and blue covers—will yer?'

'*Those* ciphering books, my dear,' corrected Miss Stafford in a low voice. 'No; we don't require any to-day. You must wait till another time.'

'Teacher,' exclaimed the other torment, in a

nasal twang, 'buy me a ball. I want that big 'un in the corner. Tell 'im to reach it down.'

'Hush, Lottie, you must not be so rude. Your papa has given me no permission to buy you anything. Who is to pay for the ball?'

'Why can't *you?*' replied the child rudely.

'Because I do not choose to do so, said Miss Stafford firmly. 'Sit down at once, and be good; or I shall inform your papa of your behaviour.'

The two children obeyed, for there was something in the teacher's manner which they dared not dispute; but they sat together sulkily, and watched with the keenest attention everything that took place. As Miss Stafford turned from them to examine a pile of illustrated children's books, something touched her elbow. A farmer's wife, in pressing forward to ask for a bottle of ink and a penholder, had squeezed the baby she carried—a bouncing boy of a twelvemonth old—against the teacher. The child chuckled and cooed. Miss Stafford turned to look at it, and a wonderful transformation seemed to take place in the expression of her features. The stern look,

almost of disgust, certainly of impatience, with which she had spoken to the little Gribbles faded away, and a sad but heavenly smile beamed on her face instead. She stretched out her hand and laid it on the infant's uncovered head. The boy chuckled again good-temperedly. Miss Stafford stooped and kissed him silently.

'Lor!' said Lottie to Carrie, under her breath, 'just look at teacher kissing that baby! She never kissed one of *us*. I'll tell ma of that as soon as we get home.'

At that moment a burly man, dressed in a suit of blue serge, beneath the open jacket of which might be seen a knitted woollen vest, rolled into the little shop, and being unable to approach the counter, bawled at the top of his voice,—

'Here, mister. Hand us over a couple o' sheets of paper and some *an*velopes, will you? I only came into the town to-day, and can't get at my togs. Why!'—he continued as he caught sight of Miss Stafford's face, which had turned deadly white upon his entrance—'God bless us and save us! It's madame.'

'No, no!' cried Miss Stafford, shrinking backward as the stranger extended his hand, 'you are mistaken. You must mean someone else.'

'*Mistaken!*' repeated the man, who was evidently a seaman, '*mistaken*, madame! Why, I'd know you in a thousand.'

The teacher threw a hurried glance towards the corner where the Gribble girls sat with open eyes and ears, and seemed suddenly to think better of her first intention.

'Of course,' she said, with a nervous laugh, 'I know you now—perfectly—and—and—I should like to speak to you. Come this way; we can finish our shopping afterwards,' and she slipped out of the door and stood upon the pathway.

'Where have you come from?' she asked with trembling lips as soon as they were alone.

'Well, madame—' he commenced.

'Oh, pray don't call me by that name,' she rejoined. 'I am known here only as Miss Stafford. I am a schoolmistress at Deepdale, and I want to forget everything else.'

'I see,' replied the sailor. 'And you're doing well, I hope, and pretty comfortable.'

'Oh, yes, I have *peace*, and that is all I strive for. Brunt, you must not tell anyone you saw me here.'

'Well, I don't know as I'm likely to be put in the way of it. It was quite an accident my coming across you. I'm just home from China, and I thought I'd take a look at my old mother afore I started again. When I came to Haltham I found I couldn't get a train on to Bonnysett (that's our place) till six to-morrow morning, so I thought I'd have a walk round the market. And to think I should have come acrost you—and bless you!—not looking a day older for all that's happened.'

'Yes, yes; but I cannot stop. I came over with some friends, and they may call for me at any moment.'

'And you're a school teacher. Well, to think of it. It wasn't much in our thoughts aboard the *Lily of Christiansand*, was it now?'

Miss Stafford shuddered visibly.

'Oh, don't speak of them—those terrible days! Thank God that they are over for ever. Good-bye, Brunt. I wish you all prosperity, but I must go.'

'I should like to have had a word or two with you, though,' said Seth Brunt, stroking his enormous beard. 'Now that we've come acrost each other again, I've got one or two things to tell you that I think you ought to know.'

'Not about *him!*' she ejaculated, with scared eyes.

'Yes, madame—I beg your pardon, I means Miss Stafford—about *him*. It won't poison you to hear it, you know, and I was always his friend, and always shall be. Now, where can I see you this evening?'

Her face blanched, but she stood her ground.

'Nowhere. It is impossible. I live miles away from here. You could not come. It is too far.'

'Oh, no, it is not. I will walk over this evening.' Then, noticing her perturbation, he added: 'Of what are you afraid?'

'Of nothing,' she answered proudly. 'Nothing can harm me now.'

'You are right, madame. Do you live alone?'

'Yes, quite alone. Even my little maid goes home at night to her mother. If you *must* speak to me, you will find me, after seven o'clock, in the schoolhouse at Deepdale. Only, say nothing of this to anybody, if you ever cared for me.'

'You know that I did care—that I *do* care,' replied Brunt roughly as she went back into the shop.

Her first fearful glance was directed towards the odious Gribble children, whispering and grinning to each other.

'Now, Mr Spring,' she said as she held out a paper to him with a trembling hand, 'these are the articles I require. Will you have them packed at once to go home in Mr Gribble's phaeton?'

'Teacher,' cried Lottie, catching at her skirt, 'who's the man with the long beard?'

'No one whom you know, my dear,' replied Miss Stafford quietly, although her face flushed with annoyance.

'Oh, you *are* red!' exclaimed the other little

wretch. 'I expect he's been scolding you. Is he your cousin, teacher? Lottie and me never let Cousin Tom scold us. If he tries it on, we thump him till he runs away. Don't we, Lottie? Oh, I say, here's pa and the phaeton. Come on, teacher, we are going home,' and away the two creatures ran, and climbed into the vehicle that had drawn up before the door.

Mr Gribble sat in it pompously. He was a little man, with a ferrety face and weak eyes, and he was obliged to make up by his manner for the dignity with which nature had not seen fit to endow him. He had married late in life, and his two daughters were the only produce of his union. It was a pity they were daughters, for they had inherited their father's prematurely aged appearance and general want of comeliness, joined to unpleasant dispositions. Still, three Mr Gribbles might have been too much for this world. He was a retired corn-chandler, but still held some interest in the shop at Haltham, which he visited each market day. Generally, Mrs Gribble, in a wonderful velvet bonnet, which she wore all the

year round, sat in state by his side, but she had been unable to come on the present occasion, and so he had offered the vacant place to Miss Stafford. He professed to be laying her under an immense obligation by driving her into Haltham, but he had only asked her in order that she might look after his unruly children. It was not the only offer of an escort that she had received that day, although she considered it the most discreet for acceptance. But she hated Mr Gribble, and, as she issued from the stationer's shop to join him, her eyes almost said so.

'Come, now, Miss Stafford,' he exclaimed snappishly, 'jump in at once, and don't keep the mare waiting. She has had several stoppages this morning, and it has made her fidgety.'

He did not move from his place, nor offer to assist her in any way, and the parcel from the stationer's being stowed under the seat, she prepared to step into the rickety old phaeton, for which purpose she had to descend by some rugged steps cut at intervals in the raised pathway to the road.

'Let me help you, Miss Stafford,' cried a young, cheerful voice.

Mr Gribble glanced up quickly at the new-comer, and the school teacher blushed. He was a man of perhaps seven-and-twenty, dressed in a brown velveteen coat and knickerbockers. His worsted stockings showed off a well-covered and well-made leg, and the white silk handkerchief knotted loosely round his throat, and the rose in his buttonhole, proved he was somewhat of a provincial dandy. He had a frank, open countenance, a clear eye and complexion, and a genial smile—taken altogether, indeed, he was a model of a fresh, good-looking young farmer, with a fair amount of intellect added to his personal characteristics.

'Mr Rushton,' said Mr Gribble formally.

'At your service,' cried the other, as he held out his hand to help Miss Stafford down the broken steps, and then he continued: 'Ah, Miss Stafford, what a traitor you are. You refused to drive into Haltham with *me* this afternoon, yet here I find you philandering with Gribble.'

'Mr Rushton, be good enough to remember that *my daughters* are present,' said Mr Gribble in a grandiloquent tone.

'Pretty dears! So they are,' returned Hal Rushton carelessly. 'You've missed something, Miss Stafford, I can assure you. The new horse is simply perfect. I was here in forty minutes. You would have enjoyed it much better than jogging along in a phaeton.'

'*You* proposed to drive Miss Stafford into Haltham in your *dog-cart?*' interposed Mr Gribble, with uplifted eyebrows.

'Certainly. Just as *you* proposed to drive her in your phaeton. Where's the difference, Mr Gribble?'

'All the difference in the world, sir. *I* am a married man!'

Hal Rushton burst into a prolonged peal of laughter. 'Oh, you married men!' he commenced. But Mr Gribble would not stay to hear the conclusion of his speech. Miss Stafford was settled in her seat, and touching up the old mare, he drove quickly from the spot. As soon, however,

as they were clear of the town, he alluded to the subject.

'I trust, Miss Stafford,' he said 'that you will not encourage an intimacy with Mr Rushton. He is not a desirable acquaintance for any young woman, in my opinion, and is a source of great disquietude to his excellent stepmother and his afflicted young brother, Mr Edward Snaley.'

'I think he is exceedingly generous and kind to both of them,' replied Miss Stafford warmly; for although she had accepted a dependent position, she was not to be sat upon by anybody. 'Mr Snaley is no relation whatever to Mr Rushton, and yet he enjoys all the privileges of a brother at Highbridge Farm. Few young men would do as much for him; and when Mr Rushton marries, I expect Mr Snaley will find his position considerably altered.'

Mr Gribble turned round and stared her in the face. 'Hoity toity!' he exclaimed. 'The young man appears to have gained an able advocate in you, Miss Stafford. At the same time I must beg you will cease to cultivate his acquaintance.'

'I am not aware,' she replied coldly, 'that I am answerable to anybody for the selection of my friends, Mr Gribble.'

'Oh, yes, you are, ma'am. The position you fill in Deepdale is a very responsible one, and it is the business of myself and my brother churchwardens, to say nothing of our pastor, Mr Measures, and his excellent lady, to see that the souls of the young people under your charge are not tampered with. They must not be permitted to come in contact with anybody likely to contaminate or unsettle them. Mr Rushton is not a pious man, Miss Stafford, and no fit friend for you.'

'My pupils are not likely to come in contact with him, or anybody else,' returned Miss Stafford. 'You know that no one (except such as have a right to do so) ever enters the schoolroom.'

'Of course not. I should be sure to hear of it if they did,' said Mr Gribble, looking at his wizened-faced offspring, who were eagerly listening to what passed between him and 'teacher.' 'But Mr Rushton's views and ideas may unsettle *you*, and through you the innocents committed to

your care. It must not be, Miss Stafford—it must not be.'

The young woman disdained to make any further reply, but sat silent and indignant by his side for the remainder of the drive, only addressing an occasional remark to one of the little girls. She dreaded every minute to hear them burst out something about the man with the long beard, but they were too cunning to moot the subject in her presence. She wished now she had not given Seth Brunt permission to visit her, but she had hardly known how to refuse an old acquaintance. Life proved sometimes too hard a puzzle to the poor girl, and she had not solved the secret to go through it comfortably. The petty tyranny of Mr Gribble and Mr Axworthy, and the matrons of Deepdale, often ground into her soul, and made her wish she had never accepted the appointment she held; but it was bread and meat to her, and she had sorely wanted both. Deepdale, as its name denoted, lay in a valley, and when once the old mare began to go down hill, she scented her stable, and it was diffi-

cult to stop her. The schoolroom stood near the church and quite half a mile away from the brand-new villa to which Mr Gribble had retired from business. He drew up sharply before the door.

'Now, Miss Stafford, be quick please,' he exclaimed, just as he had done when she was about to enter it. 'Jennie won't wait a second when she's so near home. Jump out. Lottie, throw your teacher the parcel. That's right,' and loosening the reins, he was off again before she had time to say 'thank you.'

She picked up the heavy parcel of stationery and walked slowly into the deserted schoolhouse. It was a half-holiday, of course, or else she could not have gone to Haltham. As she passed through the Gothic porch of grey stone she unlocked a door on her left and entered her own room. Even this was empty. The little maiden who waited on her had received permission to return home early that day and leave her evening duties to her employer Miss Stafford placed her parcel on the table, and laying aside her bonnet and shawl, busied herself in preparing a cup of tea.

CHAPTER II.

MR GRIBBLE'S DISCOVERY.

WITHOUT the disfiguring encumbrance of her walking attire she really looked beautiful, particularly when she had somewhat loosened her heavy knot of hair and let it rest upon her slender shoulders. Her figure was very graceful, too, notwithstanding that her cotton dress was old-fashioned and without ornament. It was difficult to believe that she was five-and-twenty, for she looked a mere girl as she walked backwards and forwards with the kettle and the teapot and the bread-and-butter, humming in a low voice to herself as she went. She felt happier now that she was released from the espionage of Mr Gribble, although the unexpected event of the afternoon had upset her, and she looked forward with some

trepidation to the coming visit of Seth Brunt. Once, as she passed a little mirror and caught sight of her pale face, she clasped her head with both her hands and spoke aloud.

'Will the spectre of the past never—*never* leave me?' she said. 'Am I always to be haunted by the misery I have cast behind me? And I think—I am almost sure—I might be so happy. Well, if it comes in my way, I *will* be,' she added determinately. 'I have suffered enough already, Heaven knows! Surely no one is doomed to a whole life of terror.' It was growing dusk by that time, and the church clock chimed out seven. 'Brunt will be here presently,' she thought. 'I will not take my cup of tea until he can join me.'

She made her little table look as inviting as she could, and lit the gas beside the fireplace. It was a comfortable set of rooms which she occupied, or her deft fingers had made them look so. They were plainly furnished in oak, but fresh flowers and muslin, and an ornament or photograph here and there, had transformed them

to the apartments of a lady. There were only two rooms, and a tiny kitchen, but when Miss Stafford had dismissed her scholars, and locked the door behind her, she felt that she was free and at peace. Not happy—far from it. The walls of her little rooms had echoed many heart-breaking sobs, and witnessed many hours of despair, of which Messrs Gribble and Axworthy knew nothing; but the woman had battled against her grief, and conquered it, and now she felt annoyed and excited to think that anything was going to disturb the buried past. Still, Seth Brunt had been a kind friend to her in the bygone days, and she did not like to be ungrateful.

'Poor old Brunt,' she thought pitifully, 'he used to stick up for me against everyone, but I honestly wish he had never run across me here. And what can he possibly have to say to me about *him?*'

As if in answer to her unspoken question, the schoolhouse bell at this moment rang out a clamorous iron peal. Miss Stafford opened the door at once and ushered her visitor in.

'Sit down, Brunt,' she said, and then, looking out into the night, she added anxiously, 'I hope no one saw you come in? Did you meet anybody just about here?'

'Not a soul, madame,' replied the sailor; 'but haven't you your liberty? Can't you do as you like?'

'Oh, yes, Brunt, I am my own mistress, when school is over, of course. Only, I think Deepdale is the most inquisitive place I ever knew. They want to know everything about everybody.'

'They don't know much about you, I expect.' said Brunt.

Her pale face flushed as she reclosed the door and sat down opposite to him in the light. 'Why should they know anything about me?' she replied. 'What business is it of theirs? I do my duty, and there our agreement ends.'

'Ah, madame, it makes my heart ache to find you here—you, who have never been used to work in your life. I thought you would have gone home to live with your mother. Someone told me that you had.'

'So I did for a while, but my mother is not rich, and I cannot live upon anyone's bounty. And then, there is Paul, you see.'

'True. And how is Paul, madame?'

Miss Stafford sighed.

'He is just the same. He will never be different. He has been *murdered!*'

She spoke bitterly, and clenching her hand, knocked it in a nervous manner against her teeth.

'Ah, madame, that is the very thing I wished to speak to you about. I saw the Captain as I passed through London. I may almost say that I came straight from him.'

'That doesn't enhance the pleasure of seeing you, Brunt.'

'Perhaps not. But he is so ill. He is almost at death's door. He is too feeble to leave the house.'

'The news does not affect me.'

'It would if you saw him, madame. He is a wreck of his former self. He is weak as a child.'

'So much the better for the next poor wretch who falls into his hands,' she answered.

'You have grown very hard since I last saw you,' said the sailor.

The rebuke goaded her into anger.

'*Hard!*' she echoed. 'Can *you*, of all men call me hard? You—who have seen me kicked like a dog, who have heard me insulted as if I had been the lowest creature on the face of earth, outraged, spit upon, deserted. You call me *hard.* It is a wonder I can endure your presence, knowing that you take his hand and call him friend.'

'Not when he ill-treated you, madame. Pardon me. I quarrelled with him then, as you must remember. But now that he is dying—without you, or anyone to smooth his pillow, I can't help thinking of the days when we was all happy together aboard the *Lily of Christiansand*, and wondering if he, poor fellow! thinks about them too.'

'I have no pity for him. He has brought his misfortunes on his own head. And if I *had*,

one thought of Paul would drown it. You seem to forget *Paul*,' said Miss Stafford indignantly.

'No, madame, I do not. But the poor Captain was not in his right mind. When a man drinks to excess, he becomes mad. If you only saw him now—'

'I don't want to see him now,' interrupted his companion. 'I never wish to see him again, either in this world or the next. I hope I never shall. I lead a life of labour and privation—sometimes I feel it to be a very hard life. But I thank God every night that I lie down in my bed that I am free and alone.'

'Then, I suppose, there's no chance of anything like a coming together again,' said Brunt wistfully.

She veered round upon him with a face full of astonishment.

'Are you *mad?*' she exclaimed.

'No, madame; I'm only sorry for both of you. It wouldn't have entered my head to say such a thing if I hadn't come acrost you so unexpectedly. But I've often wondered where you was, and wished I could tell you of him.'

'It is quite useless, I assure you,' she answered coldly. 'Even if I *could* go I would not. *That* part of my life is over, thank Heaven. I should never be such a fool as to renew it.'

'Perhaps the future will be happier. You have many years before you yet,' said Brunt. 'But the poor Captain's days are numbered—there's no doubt of that. Death's written in his face. And I felt somehow as I must tell you of it. For once'—he added hesitatingly—'*once*, you was very fond of him.'

'Yes, once I was,' admitted Miss Stafford, after a short pause. She poured the sailor out a cup of tea, and took one herself, and for a few minutes she was busied with the milk and the sugar, and said nothing. Then she recommenced,—

'I am not quite sure if I am glad or sorry to have met you again, Brunt. You were a kind friend to me in the old days, and I am grateful for it, but I never wish to think of that time again. I was too utterly miserable. I have buried myself in Deepdale, and I hoped I should never hear the past spoken of. But your presence revives it ter-

ribly, and your speech still more so. Pray talk of something else. Are you going to sea again soon?'

'Whenever I get a ship, madame. But I almost hope that mayn't be just yet. My old mother has ailed lately, and I seem never sure that each parting mayn't be the last. *Your* mother is well, I trust?'

'Yes. She was terribly cut up about my trouble. Any mother would be. But she knows I am happier as it is.'

'And Paul—' inquired Brunt.

'Paul is with her. I could not have him here. I have told you that I am known as Miss Stafford only, and I have no intention of taking any other name.'

'Ah, you will some day,' said the sailor significantly.

She coloured.

'I think not. I have had too much trouble to wish for any change excepting death. But I am really very comfortable here. The work is monotonous, but I am interested in it, and it makes me independent. I did not get it for the

asking, Brunt. I had to study hard for more than a year before I was qualified. But now I should be sorry to give it up. Deepdale is a lovely village, and I have made several friends here.'

'Aye, aye, you're the better off of the two,' replied Seth Brunt.

'As I deserve to be,' trembled on her tongue, but she wished for no more argument, and turned the subject to a less dangerous theme.

Meanwhile the two Miss Gribbles had returned home with their papa, and were recounting the adventures of the afternoon to their mamma. Mrs Gribble was a stout woman, with red cheeks with a glaze on them, round black eyes, a broad nose, and a figure which encouraged the fallacious idea that she was about to add to the population. She was extremely jealous of her ugly little husband, and had been set against the school teacher from the beginning of her career. Miss Stafford was far too handsome and refined in appearance to suit Mrs Gribble, who now heard for the first time that she had accompanied her family to Haltham.

'What's that you say, Caroline?' she demanded of her eldest daughter. 'Miss Stafford went into Haltham with you?'

'Yes, ma. We met her outside of the school-'ouse, and pa asked if she'd like to drive into Haltham, so she came too.'

'And why was *I* not informed of your intentions, Mr Gribble?' Mrs Gribble said sternly to her husband, who was sitting by with his mouth full of bread-and-butter.

'Well, my dear, as our little one puts it, it was quite a haccident. Miss Stafford required sundries for the school from Spring's, so I offered to take her there. I considered it a dooty!'

'Oh!' ejaculated Mrs Gribble significantly, and then turned to Carrie again, 'And what else have you to tell me, dear?'

'Oh, ma!' they both chimed in at once, 'Miss Stafford was *so* unkind. She nearly pulled our arms off because we went the wrong way, and shoved us into Spring's shop quite hard. She 'urt us,' they grumbled, sticking their lips out.

'Mr Gribble!' exclaimed Mrs Gribble, 'I will

not have my children struck and pushed about by that young woman. She takes a great deal too much on herself. But, of course, if *you*—the churchwarden of Deepdale—go driving her in my phee-aton into Haltham, she thinks she is *everybody!*'

'It was very wrong of her, my dear, if it occurred, but I confess I have never seen her anything but kind to *all* the children.'

'Oh, of course, you take *her* part. *That* is only what I expected,' replied Mrs Gribble sarcastically.

'Oh, ma! she *isn't* kind—not to *us!* She kissed Mrs Corney's baby to-day, *twice*, but she never kisses us.'

'You hear, Mr Gribble, you hear!'

'And to-day, when pa left us with her,' continued the little animals, perceiving their advantage, 'she didn't take no care of us at all, but went away with a man.'

'With a *man!*' cried Mrs Gribble in horror; 'you must be mistaken, my loves.'

'Oh, no, ma,' replied the children eagerly,

'he *was* a man. He had a long black beard. And when he first saw teacher, he said, "Hullo! here's madam," and she said, "No, I ain't," and then afterwards she said, "Yes, I am, and you must come outside with me." And they went outside, and stayed ever so long, and when she came back her face was so red we thought he must have been scolding her.'

Mrs Gribble leaned back in her chair and folded her hands majestically upon her black silk stomach.

'Well, Mr Gribble,' she said, after a pause, 'do you hear *that?*'

'I do; but I can hardly believe it. In Mr Spring's shop, did you say, Lottie?'

'Yes, pa; a big man, with a loud voice and a blue jacket—a sailor-looking sort of man. And he said, "Hullo! here's madam.'

'*Hullo! here's madam,*' repeated Mrs Gribble contemptuously; 'a nice sort of greeting to a respectable young woman. One of her former associates, doubtless. And *this* is the person to whom you have entrusted the charge of my precious children.'

'I must inquire into it, most decidedly,' said Mr Gribble. 'Charlotte and Caroline, if you have finished your meal, say your grace and go up to bed. I wish to speak alone with your mamma.'

'He's going to give 'er a wigging for talking against Miss Stafford,' whispered Carrie to Lottie, oracularly, as they climbed the stairs together. 'Pa likes teacher a deal more than ma does. I think ma hates 'er—don't you?'

'I suppose you'll 'ardly stick up for Miss Stafford any more after *this*,' said Mrs Gribble when they were gone. 'A nice thing for the schoolmistress of Deepdale to be called a "*madam*" in an open shop on market day. Why, it'll be all over Haltham by this time.'

'I don't like it, my dear, I confess. I don't like it,' replied Mr Gribble, rubbing his scrubby little chin. 'We must have no scandal in Deepdale school, and no levity on the part of its mistress. I didn't quite like the way in which she received an admonition I gave her as we were coming home respecting young Rushton.'

'Young Rushton! Oh, so there's another, is there. *One* is not enough for my lady at a time. Well, if it isn't the most disgraceful thing I ever heard in my life.'

'Not quite that, my dear, not quite that,' replied Mr Gribble. 'Mr Rushton's attentions may mean nothing, but the teacher of Deepdale cannot be too careful. I was pointing this out to her, but she did not take my warning in the spirit I should have liked to see. And now there is this other person. I think I must ask Miss Stafford for an explanation.'

'Explanation!' snorted Mrs Gribble. 'Her conduct ought to be exposed before the whole parish. I always said she wasn't fit to 'old the position.'

'I'll walk down and speak to her about it to-night,' said her husband, with sudden resolution, as he stood up and buttoned his coat.

'You had much better go to the parsonage and inform Mr Measures of her disgraceful behaviour,' retorted Mrs Gribble.

'No, my dear, not until I have tried my own

authority. Miss Stafford is a sensible young woman. She will surely listen to the voice of her churchwarden.'

'Well, don't you let her keep you there till midnight, or I'll know the reason why,' screamed out his spouse as he left the room.

'My dear, my dear,' he said expostulatingly as he hurried down the garden path.

He honestly considered Miss Stafford a very valuable assistant in the task of rearing the future generation of Deepdale, though there was not the slightest ground for the unworthy suspicions of Mrs Gribble. But he was both a prudish and a priggish little man, with a vast idea of his own importance, and quite believed that an angry tone from him would be sufficient to make the teacher tremble in her shoes and entreat him to avert the evil consequences of her levity. He was thinking thus as he reached the schoolhouse and rang the bell. Miss Stafford came to the door, but she did not throw it open for him to enter. On the contrary, she retained her hold upon the handle as she spoke to him.

CHAPTER III.

A GOOD BROAD HINT.

'Is it you, Mr Gribble?' she said, peering out into the darkness, for it was now nearly nine o'clock. 'What is it that you want?'

'I wish to speak to you Miss Stafford, upon a subject of importance.'

'Not to-night, surely. It is too late. Besides'—with a slight hesitation—'I am engaged.'

Mr Gribble was not slow to note the hesitation.

'*Engaged!*' he echoed sharply. '*How* engaged? With whom?'

'That is *my* affair, surely,' replied the teacher; 'but if you particularly wish to know, with a friend—'

'A friend!' exclaimed Mr Gribble; 'what friends have you in Deepdale whose presence prevents my speaking to you? Is it a lady friend? I

presume you would not be sitting alone with a *gentleman* at this time of night. It's past nine.'

'I am not bound to tell you anything about the matter, Mr Gribble, and I consider your questions border on impertinence. Be good enough to come and see me to-morrow morning,' replied Miss Stafford with some asperity, for her spirit was roused by the pertinacity of her visitor.

She attempted to close the door as she spoke, but Mr Gribble pressed his whole weight against it and entered the room. Beside the table sat Seth Brunt, the identical 'sailor sort of man' with the black beard of whom his little girls had spoken to him, whilst the presence of the tea tray and his empty cup and saucer proved that he had been taking a meal with the school teacher.

'So!' ejaculated Mr Gribble, as he glared at the intruder, '*this* was your engagement, Miss Stafford, was it? *This* was the reason you tried to thrust me from your door. The parson shall hear of this miss—the churchwardens shall hear of it—the *parish* shall hear of it—and then you shall hear what they say.'

Miss Stafford could have shaken the little wretch in her indignation, and put him out of the room again. But she only stood proud and pale, and looked him full in the face, whilst she kept one hand pressed upon the table.

'And the parish shall hear, Mr Gribble, that you forced yourself into my private room against my wishes, and decide whether that is conduct that comes within the radius of your authority. Be good enough to leave me, sir. I don't wish to ask my friend, who is just going, to take you with him.'

Mr Gribble glanced at big, burly Seth Brunt, and thought it best to make no further disturbance for the time being. Clapping his hat upon his head, he turned away, muttering,—

'You'll repent this, Miss Stafford. I shall lay the whole case before Mr Measures to-morrow morning, and you will find that you'll repent it.'

'I am not afraid of Mr Measures,' she said quietly as she closed the door after him. As he floundered through the dark porch, he ran up against another body.

'Who are *you?*' he asked roughly.

'I am Hal Rushton,' replied that young man's voice. 'Are you Mr Gribble?'

'Yes, sir, I am Mr Gribble. And may I ask what business *you* have at the schoolhouse?'

'You can ask, certainly, but it lies in my option to answer you. However, I am not ashamed of my errand. I came here to speak to Miss Stafford.'

'At nine o'clock at night, sir?'

'Exactly! Is there anything wrong with nine o'clock at night? If so—why are *you* here?'

'*I* came to see Miss Stafford on business.'

'So did I—' replied the imperturbable young man.

'Well, you will *not* see her, then, Mr Rushton. She is engaged with a friend—a gentleman friend—and no one else can be admitted. But the parson shall hear of it, sir—and the *parish* shall hear of it into the bargain.'

'That Miss Stafford has a friend, is that any marvel? I should have thought she might number them by the hundred.'

At that moment the door reopened, and Miss Stafford and Seth Brunt appeared upon the threshold.

'Good-night,' she was saying, 'I wish you had not such a long walk back to Haltham, but there is no alternative.'

Mr Gribble hurried off into the darkness, but Hal Rushton held his ground.

'Is it a friend of yours, Miss Stafford?' he asked. 'Can I be of any assistance? Shall I take him to Highbridge Farm for the night?'

'Is it *you*, Mr Rushton?' she said quickly. 'Oh, no! I would not trouble you for the world. This—this—gentleman is used to walking, and will not mind the distance. Good-night,' she said once more to Brunt, who shambled away on his road to Haltham. And then, with a slight inclination of the head, she was about to retreat again within her own little fortress.

'Mayn't I speak to you?' asked Hal Rushton.

'Of course,' she replied in a trembling voice, and he followed her into the room, though they did not close the door.

'You are troubled to-night, I am sure. What has annoyed you?' he said gently.

She did not answer him. The tears began to course down her cheek. He felt inexpressibly drawn to her.

'Is it that man Gribble? Has he presumed to find fault with you? You must try and not mind it. Everyone knows what an interfering, snappish, overbearing little cad he is.'

'It is not only that,' she answered. 'I have been worried and upset to-night by talking over old times. You must not be surprised at that. You have guessed, I am sure, that I was not brought up to this sort of thing—that my life has been, in fact, altogether different.'

'I was sure, from the first moment I saw you, Miss Stafford, that force of circumstances had compelled you to stoop very low from your original position, and I have honoured you for the courage with which you have accepted the change.'

'Oh, no. I am not courageous—far from it. If I were, I should not be so low spirited now. But

it is just as you say, and I only wish I could now entirely forget the past.'

'If that is impossible, can you not lessen the pain by trying to believe in a happier future. You are young, Miss Stafford. You are calculated to adorn any position (a far higher one than could be found in Deepdale), and you have (please God) a long life before you. Why not be hopeful of what may still be in store?'

He was sitting on the table, and she was standing beside him, and as he spoke Hal Rushton ventured to take her listless hand and hold it in his own.

'I do not think,' she answered, 'that I was born under a lucky star. Some people are not, they say. I could be contented enough here if they would let me do my work in my own way. But they exercise so much control over me. I must alter this and alter that, and even my leisure hours (as you have seen) may not be kept sacred to myself. Mr Gribble must spy and interfere and find fault. Even this visit of yours may be turned into a crime. It is hard, when a woman is doing her best, to be so coerced and sat upon.'

'It is infamous—abominable,' coincided young Rushton warmly; 'but Mr Measures will set it all right, I am sure. I can so well sympathise with you, Miss Stafford, for I, too, am not my own master.'

'Not *you!*' she said, glancing up at his muscular, well-knit frame as though surprised to think that anyone could master him.

'No, indeed. Legally, of course, I am the same as yourself, but morally I catch it if I say my soul's my own. You have seen my stepmother and her son?'

Miss Stafford nodded.

'How my poor father ever came to marry her, I cannot think. To me she is repulsive. But he was very ill for years before he died, and I was a lanky lad of no good to anybody, and I suppose she got on the right side of him by professing to be a good sick-nurse. Anyway, he married her, and brought her and her son, Ted Snaley, home to Highbridge. And they have spoiled my life between them since.'

'And yet you keep them there. Isn't that

stretching your benevolence to too fine a point, Mr Rushton?'

'I wish you wouldn't call me "Mr Rushton,"' he replied, taking no notice of her question. 'It is what Mrs Snaley always calls me. We have known each other now for quite a year. Don't you think it is time to say "Hal."' She hesitated, with her eyes fixed upon the ground. 'Don't you feel friendly enough with me to say it?' he persisted.

'Oh, yes, I feel very friendly with you.'

'Then prove it by treating me with greater intimacy. And *your* name, Miss Stafford? I have never heard it. May I not know that?'

'I have never told my Christian name to a soul in Deepdale,' she said.

'Tell it to me now. I will never repeat it excepting to yourself,' urged Hal Rushton.

'It is Paula.'

'Paula! What a sweet, uncommon name. I never heard it before. Are you English?'

'Oh, yes.'

'And you have a mother living?'

'Yes, far away from here.'

'Happy girl! I wish I had one too. Someone to go to in trouble, or perplexity, or pain. I never loved a woman, Paula, since my dear mother died, until—until—'

He paused nervously, and she rushed into the breach.

'You were going to tell me why you keep your stepmother and her son at Highbridge Farm.'

'Well, this is the reason. At one time she persuaded my father to leave her everything, but before he died he changed his mind and made me his heir, which was only fair, because the farm came to him with my mother. He left his wife a hundred a year for her lifetime, which was all he could rightfully call his own, but it would have so reduced her comforts that I had not the heart to turn her and Ted out of Highbridge, so they've lived there ever since.'

'Using your substance just as if it was their own,' said Miss Stafford.

'Yes, they do so pretty well. But it can't go on for ever, and so I tell Mrs Rushton. If I should marry—'

'Oh, you're *sure* to marry,' she interposed.

He gazed at her wistfully.

'*I* am not sure, Paula. It will all depend. I am not the sort of man who could marry *anybody*, just for the sake of marrying.'

'Oh, I think not.'

'I have seen so much, of late years, of the horrors of an unsuitable marriage that I shall be doubly careful in making my choice. My wife will have to be very nice indeed.'

'Why should you doubt it? Are nice women so rare?'

'I think they are, though I do not despair of finding her some day. But the question is, when found, will she condescend to notice me?'

'Ah, that is one of the good things of the future in which you tell me to have so much faith, Mr Rushton.'

'Mr Rushton again.'

'Hal, then. But what would become of me if Mr Gribble were to overhear such a piece of impropriety? He was cautioning me only this afternoon, on our way back from Haltham, against being too intimate with you.'

'Confound his impudence! What will he interfere with next? One would think he was king of Deepdale. But you won't let him influence your actions, will you?'

'I think not. I never let anyone influence my actions while they approve themselves to my conscience,' she answered proudly.

'That is right. I love a high-spirited and high-minded woman, and I wish—I *wish* you were out of all this.'

Miss Stafford assumed a look of comical dismay.

'Oh, pray don't wish *that*. That is, to wish me without a roof over my head, or bread to eat. You don't know the absolute necessity there is for my working.'

'No, I don't, or for your starving either,' he answered bluntly. 'However, I suppose I had better be making tracks for home. Good-night, Paula. Say "Good-night, Hal!"'

'Good-night, Hal.'

'Thank you,' pressing her hand firmly. 'I shall sleep all the better for that, and dream perhaps of a possible future.'

And with a long, significant look into her eyes, he released her hand and walked away.

Miss Stafford closed and locked the door after him, and sat for some time at the open casement, which was wreathed with roses and clematis, looking out upon the quiet summer night, and thinking over the events of the day. She was not sure if she was any the happier for the interview which had just passed with Hal Rushton. She could not mistake his meaning. He made it plain enough. He wished to be her friend, perhaps something more than a friend, and she had seen the declaration trembling on his lips many a time, and kept him from uttering it by sheer stratagem. To-night she knew he would have spoken if she had given him the least encouragement, and to-night she would have felt more unequal to giving him an answer than ever before. For Seth Brunt's visit had quite unnerved her. He was like a ghost raised from the buried past. He had spoken of things and people she had hoped never to have heard named again. He had made her feel that she had *not* com-

menced to live a new life, and that she never could whilst the old life existed and people walked and talked who remembered and had taken part in it. And then the hint, slight as it was, that she had been somewhat in the wrong, had hurt her terribly. How had she been in the wrong to save Paul and herself from a life of misery—a slow, lingering death of torture? She paced her little room impatiently as she recalled it. All she wanted was to live at peace, and interfere with no one, and yet even so small a boon was denied her. If old acquaintances cropped up to annoy her in Deepdale, where on all God's earth would she be safe? And then this quarrel with Mr Gribble. It was very silly and insignificant, no doubt, but there was no telling where it might lead, nor what revelations might not be made before it had run its course. Altogether, Miss Stafford went to bed at last in a very unsettled frame of mind, and did not feel much better when she rose in the morning. She was listless and headachy, and her mind wandered, and she fancied that her scholars obseved her

distraction and passed comments upon it. One fact was significant. When the roll was called over, the two Miss Gribbles were conspicuous only by their absence, kept at home, doubtless, by their offended papa. Miss Stafford could have smiled at so dubious a piece of a policy had she not known that the little churchwarden was really a power in the parish, and not to be angered with impunity. But she did not regret the position she had assumed all the same. She could not brook being called to task for an innocent action, like one of her own school-children, but she felt a little anxious for the result, and was not at all taken by surprise at receiving a note from the clergyman, Mr Measures, during the course of the day, asking her to step over to the parsonage as soon as school was concluded. So at five o'clock in the afternoon, when she had seen the last little toddler safely on its way home, she put on her shawl and bonnet and walked across the churchyard and into the presence of Mr and Mrs Measures.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CROSS-EXAMINATION.

MR GRIBBLE had been there before her, of course. He had trotted over, big with importance, and ruffled like an angry cockerel, directly after breakfast, to tell the parson of the discovery he had made. But somewhat to his astonishment, and greatly to his indignation, his story was not received with the horror he had anticipated. Mr Measures was a good, fatherly man, full of sympathy for the young and friendless, and slow to suspect evil, because he committed none. His wife followed his example, and was, moreover, much more cordially disposed towards the school teacher than towards the churchwarden. So they heard Mr Gribble's account in silence, and then Mr Measures remarked that he did not sup-

pose that Miss Stafford intended her action to be taken as either unkind or rude. Mr Gribble stared.

'Unkind or rude, sir. You can scarcely have understood my meaning. It is not the young woman's *action* I complain of, though that was irreverent enough towards a man of *my* position. But it is the *reason* for the action that forms the scandal. A *man*, Mr Measures—a rough-looking, bearded man, sitting in an unmarried woman's apartments at nine o'clock at night. What do you think of *that*, sir? What do you think of that?'

Mr Measures was one of those good old-fashioned clergymen who have never dreamt of wearing cassocks or chasubles, or departing from the ways of the first half of the century. He gave his parishioners three full-barrelled services every Sunday, and let them do pretty much as they chose for the rest of the week. He put his hands under his coat tails as Gribble finished his sentence and looking down upon him blandly, replied with a smile,—

'Tell me what *you* think of it, Mr Gribble.'

At these words Mrs Measures raised her eyes

from her needlework, and fixed them expectantly on the churchwarden, and Gribble felt he was the chosen one to make the parson and his wife see Miss Stafford's conduct in its proper light.

'What I think, sir?' he reiterated. 'Well, I think that it is simply *disgraceful*.'

'Oh, Mr Gribble, that is too hard a word,' interposed the sweet voice of Mrs Measures. 'Pray think of whom you are speaking. Miss Stafford has always conducted herself in the most discreet manner since coming to Deepdale—and I do not believe that such a term as *disgrace* can be associated with her name.'

'Very well, madam, very well. You must think as you choose,' replied Mr Gribble, 'but I am a heye-witness of what occurred, and I don't agree with you. My daughters heard Miss Stafford make an appointment with this stranger, in Spring's shop, in the afternoon, and there he was drinking tea with her in the evening. Do you call that respectable, ma'am? *She* knew what people would call it herself. She tried to hold the door against my entrance—against *me*,

Mr Measures, who engaged her for the situation—and if I hadn't pushed my way in, I shouldn't have seen the fellow at all.'

'Well, I don't think you had a right to force your way in to *any* woman's private apartments, Mr Gribble,' said Mrs Measures indignantly.

'I agree with my wife, that you exceeded your duty,' acquiesced the parson, 'and I trust that it will not recur. The guardians of the parish have nothing to do with Miss Stafford after school hours, nor any authority to interfere with her seeing her friends.

'But the *time*, sir; you seem to forget the time!' exclaimed Gribble, who was working himself up into a fury. 'Besides, that is not all. As I left the schoolhouse—I may say, as I was *put out* of it—I met young Rushton going in as familiarly as if he lived there. Is *that* as it ought to be? Miss Stafford would have been driving about with that young man all yesterday afternoon if I had not taken her into Halthàm myself. And I think we all know pretty well what sort of gentleman Mr Rushton is.'

'Come! come!' interrupted the parson, 'you are going too far. I have never heard anything against the character of Mr Rushton. In fact, I think he is a young man to be highly respected. It appears to me, Mr Gribble, that you are viewing the whole matter with a jaundiced eye. So long as Miss Stafford does her duty to the children of Deepdale, what can it signify to you or anyone what friends she receives in her private apartments when her long day's work is over?'

'No, indeed,' added Mrs Measures. 'I am sure the poor girl must need a little recreation, for she slaves herself to death in the schoolroom.'

Mr Gribble folded his arms, and looked from the husband to the wife in silent amazement.

'What can it signify?' he reiterated. 'Well, Mr Measures, I never thought to hear such a question from your lips. Don't this young woman have the charge of our innocent *gurls* from morning to night? Don't they imbibe her opinions and retain her impressions, and is a person whose conduct is open to the slightest suspicion in regard to levity fit to have the planting of the

precious seed in their souls? I'm sorry, Mr Measures, as we don't see this thing in the same light, but Mr Axworthy and me, and several others, have talked it over, sir, and we have come to the conclusion that whilst Miss Stafford refuses to explain her conduct, or to promise to alter it, that we shall withdraw our children from attending the school, and educate them elsewhere.'

Mrs Measures looked distressed, and her husband stroked his shorn chin thoughtfully. The matter was becoming serious. If the village people clubbed together to ostracise Miss Stafford, the funds for the payment of her salary would not be forthcoming.

'You surely cannot be in earnest, Mr Gribble?' he said at length. 'You cannot mean to ruin this young woman's prospects for such a trifle?'

'*We* don't think it a trifle, Mr Measures, and we *are* in earnest—me and Axworthy, and Green and Wilson. You see, we are all married men, sir, and the ladies have determined that an explanation is doo to them, and so it is to all of us —in my opinion.'

'But has anyone asked Miss Stafford for an explanation?' demanded Mr Measures.

'No, sir. We leave that to you, as the proper person to protect the morals of Deepdale.'

'I am *sure* there will be no difficulty about it,' said Mrs Measures anxiously. 'Miss Stafford has never tried to conceal any of her doings from us yet. Edward, dear, why not ask her to come over here this afternoon, and put the question to her yourself? She will tell you at once who her visitor was, and then Mr Gribble will be satisfied.'

'If she promises the offence shall not be repeated,' said the churchwarden cautiously.

'You have to prove first that it *was* an offence,' observed Mr Measures, in a tone of rebuke. 'However, I will do as my wife suggests, and you and Mr Axworthy can meet Miss Stafford here at five o'clock, if it pleases you, and hear what she has to tell me about her visitor.'

'That is all we ask for, sir, and we will be punctual,' replied Mr Gribble; and, accordingly, when the school teacher entered the parsonage

she found the two churchwardens awaiting her. The party was assembled in the drawing-room, and as Miss Stafford entered it, with her sweet face rather flushed by annoyance and expectation, Mrs Measures rose promptly to bid her welcome.

'I hope it did not inconvenience you to come over, my dear,' she said kindly, 'but Mr Measures wanted to see you particularly this afternoon.'

'Yes; I understand,' said Paula simply.

'Miss Stafford,' commenced the clergyman, 'I have such perfect faith in your discretion and candour that I have no hesitation in asking you to answer me a few questions. It seems that a visitor whom you entertained last night at the schoolhouse has furnished the subject for some unpleasant remarks respecting yourself, and I want you to tell me the whole truth about him, in order that I may contradict any idle stories his visit may have provoked.'

Paula's face had assumed rather a haughty look during this little tirade, and at the close of it she asked briefly,—

'What is it you wish to know, sir?'

'Who was the man who visited you last evening?'

'An old friend of mine.'

'How did he find you out?'

'I met him unexpectedly in Haltham yesterday.'

'Perhaps he is a relation?'

'No, sir; we are not related.'

'What is his name?'

'That I cannot tell you, Mr Measures.'

'Mr Gribble tells me he was a sailor?'

'Yes, he is a sailor.'

'Where did you make his acquaintance, then?'

'That question, also, you must excuse my answering, sir. It belongs to my past life, and has nothing to do with Deepdale.'

'Oh, yes, it has, Miss Stafford, as you will soon see,' exclaimed Mr Gribble, chuckling.

'Are these two men brought here to be my judges, Mr Measures?' said Paula quickly.

'No, no, my dear,' replied the parson; 'but it will be to your advantage if you can satisfy their natural curiosity on the subject.'

'Unpardonable curiosity, you mean,' amended Mrs Measures warmly. 'Edward, I object to

this cross-examination altogether. It is unworthy of you, and insulting to Miss Stafford, who has always conducted herself with rigorous propriety in Deepdale. If she says that her visitor was a respectable man (and I am sure she would receive none other), her word should be sufficient for us and everyone. What is the use of knowing his name?'

'*I* am quite ready to accept Miss Stafford's word,' said the parson.

'Thank you both very much,' replied Paula gratefully.

'But *we* are not so trusting, Miss Stafford—me and my good friend and brother churchwarden here, Mr Axworthy,' exclaimed Mr Gribble, who had constituted himself spokesman; 'nor the parish ain't so trusting either, as I have already told our good minister and his lady. We demand a full explanation of the reason you had *two* gentlemen in your rooms last night, and we mean to have it.'

'Do you?' replied Paula, turning the full light of her blazing eyes upon him, 'then I

refuse to give it you. If Mr and Mrs Measures are satisfied that I meant no harm, and did no harm, I care nothing for what anyone else may think or say. My rooms are my own, and whatever visitors I admitted there did not, at all events, *force* their way in in the unmanly way that *you* did, Mr Gribble.'

'Very well, Mr Measures,' said the little churchwarden, rising, 'this settles it. Neither *my* daughters, nor Mr Axworthy's daughters, nor the daughters of none of our friends, will attend the parish school again, until that young woman is removed from her office as teacher.'

'My dear Miss Stafford, do consider,' said the minister in a low voice; 'your fate is in their hands. If the parish generally make up their minds to withdraw their children from school, the funds to pay your salary will not be forthcoming.'

'I cannot help it, Mr Measures. I will rather starve than submit to such tyranny. The—the—friend who came last night is not likely to visit me again; but if he did, I could not refuse to receive him.'

'Yet you will not tell me his name, or his errand?'

She shook her head.

'It seems strange you should observe such reticence, Miss Stafford. A young woman—almost a girl—like yourself can have no past history to conceal. Will you confide this secret to Mrs Measures, who takes a real interest in you?'

'I will confide it to no one, sir. It concerns no one but myself.'

'But I understand that young Rushton was also at your rooms last evening.'

'That is true, sir.'

'After the first man had left you.'

'After the first had left me. But he only stayed a short time, and the door by which he entered was not even closed behind him.'

'I am sorry, though, that you should have allowed him to come in. There was no harm in it, I am sure. Still, the world is very censorious, and a young unmarried woman cannot be too cautious in her behaviour.'

'Well, Mr Measures,' exclaimed Mr Gribble,

aggressively, 'and has the young woman given you a satisfactory explanation of the unusual visit she received last night?'

'Miss Stafford is apparently not at liberty to disclose the name of the gentleman, nor the object with which he entered the schoolhouse, but I feel certain that she has no reason to be ashamed of either.'

'I have not, sir,' replied Paula.

'Well, Mr Axworthy and me are not satisfied, sir, and we must beg as you'll give the young woman her notice. The parish school is meant for the children of the parish, and we have a right to object to such proceedings on the teacher's part. We don't want no scandals in Deepdale, so the sooner she goes the better.'

'Stop a moment, Mr Gribble, and be good enough to remember to whom you are speaking,' said Mr Measures with dignity; 'it is for *me* to decide this question, and not you. Miss Stafford,' he continued, turning to Paula, 'I think these men have a certain right on their side, though they have forgotten to temper their

justice with mercy. I think you owe Deepdale a little more explanation than you have given. I mean with regard—not to Mr Rushton, whom we all know—but this stranger. But I wish to do nothing in a hurry. Take a couple of days to consider it, and at the end of that time I will see you again. I think that will suit all parties.'

'I thank you, sir, for your indulgence,' said Paula, 'but you may as well give me my notice at once, for it will make no difference. If I am unworthy of being trusted in so small a matter, I must be unworthy to have the charge of the children of this parish committed to me.'

'Of course. That's just what *I* say,' interposed Mr Gribble.

'I prefer you should think the matter over quietly for a couple of days,' replied Mr Measures, without noticing the churchwarden's remark, 'and perhaps you may see your way out of the difficulty. My wife will have a talk with you about it, too, and you know she sympathises with you, and believes in you. Now, I will not detain you longer. And I request, Mr Gribble, that neither

you nor anybody else visits the schoolhouse until this matter is settled. I will not have Miss Stafford worried, nor annoyed in any way. You can do as you choose about your children, but I forbid you, or your wives, intruding your opinions upon her. 'Good-morning.'

The clergyman turned from them to shake hands with the school teacher, and the two churchwardens shuffled out of the room, looking far less pompous than they had done on entering it. Paula Stafford walked home again very thoughtfully. As far as she was concerned, the matter was already at a conclusion, for she had not the slightest intention of disclosing Seth Brunt's name, or rousing the public curiosity concerning her past life. How could she tell that, once having a clue, the inquisitive might not go on and on, until they had learned her entire history. She had been thinking, ever since the sailor's visit, that it would be safer and better for her to turn her back on Deepdale. He had came once, against her wishes, and he might come again, and he was a terribly close link with what had

gone before. In his enthusiasm for his (so-called) friend, and his clumsy desire to set matters on a less distressful footing, he might blurt out her story to anyone who seemed likely to help him in the matter—might even take Hal Rushton into his confidence, and try to enlist his sympathies and assistance. Good Heavens! it was too great a risk to run. Seth Brunt had driven her from the place for ever. She reached her home, weary and ill at ease, for the thought of leaving Deepdale was linked with a terrible disappointment and a heartache. Her little maid met her at the door with sparkling, excited eyes.

'Oh, please, teacher, young Mr Martin's been to see you, and he's brought you such a beautiful posy, all jenny-remums and roses—and he's brought a noose-paper, too, and you're to read it, please—and there's been a terrible haccident.'

'An accident, Sarah—where?'

'On the railway, teacher, and a heap of people killed; and Mr Martin said 'twas the *Evening Noose*, and he brought it from Haltham expressly for you to see.'

'That was very kind of him, though I don't much enjoy reading of horrors. If you've laid the tea, Sarah, you can go home to your mother. I shall not want anything more to-night.'

'Ain't you well, teacher?' asked the girl.

'I have a headache, my dear. That is all. I shall feel better when I have had my tea.'

'I 'ope no one's been a-worrying of you,' said Sarah sympathetically, 'for Tom Green, the butcher's son, told me Mr Gribble had been talking of you in such a manner up at their shop this morning that his fingers itched to knock him down.'

Paula flushed faintly.

'That was very good of Tom, Sarah, but you mustn't believe all he says, nor Mr Gribble either. But run along now, for I must not talk to you, or my head will ache worse than it does. Good-night.'

And dropping a respectful curtsey, the little serving maiden left her teacher to herself. She poured out her cup of tea and took up the newspaper listlessly, sighing as she unfolded it.

If Gribble was going about the village spreading scandal as he went, it would be useless for her to attempt to stem the torrent of suspicion that would dog her every movement. Better be out of it all—even at the cost of relinquishing the sweetest hope that had come to her since she had been her own mistress. She had not long to look for the account of the railway accident. It blazed upon her view in the largest possible type as soon as she glanced at the paper.

'Terrible accident to the Northern Express. Collision with the 6 A.M. from Haltham. Twenty passengers killed and wounded.'

Her eyes swam in mist. Her head grew dizzy. *Where* had she heard of the 6 A.M. train from Haltham? Suddenly it flashed upon her. It was the one by which Brunt intended to travel to see his old mother at Bonnysett. She turned quickly to the list of killed, which was given below, and the first name she came across was that of *Seth Brunt, mariner.*

CHAPTER V.

THE CONFESSION.

It was a terrible shock to her—so sudden and so unexpected that for some time she could not believe it to be true. She did not care for the dead man, far from it. For the last twelve hours she had been regarding the fact of his having met her in Haltham as the greatest misfortune that could have occurred to her. But, though always bluff and outspoken, he had been her friend and her protector in the bygone days; and even if he had been her enemy, it was frightful to think he should have been cut off so suddenly and by such a terrible death. She read mechancially how the accident had occurred — how the unfortunate passengers had been crushed and mutilated and

scalded and burned—how they had shrieked and groaned, and how the survivors had wept and fainted, until her heart grew sick within her. But still her eyes kept turning from the detailed horrors that make the fortune of a penny paper to the name at the head of the list of killed, 'Seth Brunt, mariner.'

Seth Brunt *dead!* Seth Brunt, who had sat at that very table, and drank tea with her only the night before, and talked so certainly of his own prospects—dead, dumb, silent for ever more—never able to follow her to Deepdale again, and worry her about changing a resolution which had been firmly and unalterably made so long ago. As she realised the truth, Paula's first feeling was one of relief—her next of shame that she could feel anything but sorrow to hear of an honest, well-meaning life cut off in its prime. And with her self-reproach came her tears, first quietly stealing one after the other from beneath her downcast eyelids, until they coursed rapidly down her cheeks, and she laid her head on the table and cried bitterly—not

only for Seth Brunt's death, but for all the recollections it brought in its train, and the misery which his ill-timed visit had caused her. For Paula could not help recognising that the poor man's unfortunate demise would not help her in the least with the vicar or the churchwardens. It left her in the same perplexity. To reveal his name, and the accident which had removed him from her path, was to put them on the track of her past life, and she might as well make a clean breast of it at once. For there was *that other*—the friend of the dead man—still living, and whilst he lived she could never feel safe. Her sad thoughts so occupied her mind, and her violent grief so dulled her senses, that someone lifted the latch of the outer door and stood beside the table before she was aware of his presence.

'Paula!' he exclaimed in a voice of concern, 'what *is* the matter?'

She started then, and lifted up her blurred and tear-stained face to encounter the anxious gaze of Hal Rushton.

'Oh, Mr Rushton,' she said, springing up, 'I had no idea that I was not alone. How foolish you must think me!' And she began to violently wipe her wet face with her handkerchief, while she wondered what she should say if he questioned her. 'I must look a nice fright,' she remarked, with a nervous laugh, as, having given a final resolute dab to her eyes, she sat down again and began to rattle the crockery on the tea tray.

'Never mind what you look like,' replied the young man, 'but tell me what has occasioned your distress. Surely Mr Gribble has not dared to annoy you again. If he has, he shall answer to me for it.'

'No, Mr Gribble has not visited the schoolhouse,' said Paula, with a sob in her throat, 'but I have seen him all the same. I was summoned to the parsonage this afternoon, Mr Rushton, at the suggestion of Mr Gribble and Mr Axworthy, and—and—'

'Well?' demanded Hal anxiously.

'They have given me the option of telling

them everything I know concerning my visitor of last night, or giving up my situation.'

'And you will tell them, of course?'

'No, I shall relinquish my situation,' returned Paula, with a sigh.

'But why, Paula, why? I acknowledge it is a piece of gross impertinence and tyranny on the part of the churchwardens to demand such an explanation, but there can be nothing that you need mind their knowing, and sooner than lose your position—sooner than leave Deepdale—surely you will make the concession?'

'I think not. I am a proud woman, and they have wounded my pride—deeply. Mr Measures would be quite satisfied with my assurance that the man came here on purely private business, and that he will never come here again—for he *will* never come here again, Hal,' said Paula, relapsing into tears—'but the churchwardens refused to accept my word, and I am determined to satisfy them no further. They declare that they and their friends will remove their children from school, and wanted Mr Measures to give

me my notice at once. But it is all the same. I consider it is given, and so does the vicar, and another month will see me out of Deepdale.'

'It is infamous, it is scandalous!' exclaimed Hal Rushton as he rose and commenced to pace up and down the little room. 'Paula, where will you go to?'

'Oh, that will be easily settled. I have my mother, you know. I shall go to her.'

'But to be deprived of your means of living, and for no fault of your own. It is shameful! It may be months before you obtain another appointment, Paula.'

'That is very likely, particularly with the character I shall carry away from here. But Mr and Mrs Measures are very kind, Hal, and I think they will do their best to help me.'

'And you will leave us—you will go, perhaps, to the other end of England, where I may never see you again,' cried the young farmer in despair.

'I don't want to go. I would stay if I could. I am very, *very* unhappy,' said Paula, weeping.

Her evident regret raised a hope in Rushton's

breast. He ceased his pacing, and came and sat down close beside her.

'Paula,' he whispered, bending over her, 'why do you go? You know you can stay if you choose. When I spoke to you yesterday, darling, about being my friend, and calling me by my Christian name, you must have guessed what I was leading to—that I did not say more only because I feared to startle you—and that, had I shown you all that was in my heart, I should have said, not "Paula, be my friend," but, "be *my wife*."'

Her face was hidden from him, bent down on her two hands, but as he spoke he saw that she was stirred.

'Your wife,' she murmured.

'Yes, dear, my wife, and my friend, for the terms should be synonymous. I am so much alone. You would be *everything* to me. I told you something of my means and prospects, but it is due now that you should know more. I am not a poor man, Paula. I am (what the country people call) "well-to-do." Highbridge Farm is my own property, and that, with some houses I

have in Haltham, bring me in over eight hundred a year. By-and-by I hope to double it. So you see that I shall be able to keep you in comfort. Then—don't suppose that I shall let you be worried by my stepmother and her son. Other provision shall be made for them. Only say that you will not leave Deepdale—that you will stay here as the mistress of Highbridge Farm.'

He waited a few seconds for an answer, but none came.

'Why don't you answer me, darling?' the young man pleaded. 'You knew I was going to say this some day, surely. You must have seen it was coming.'

Paula raised her head and confronted him. There was no agitation in her face—only a deep melancholy—perhaps, in spite of her joy, a little regret.

'Yes, Hal,' she said, 'I have guessed it for some time past. Only, I was not sure if I ought to let you say it—whether it would not be happier for both of us if it were left unsaid.'

'But that is impossible, dearest. What happiness

could equal that of belonging to each other for life, at least from my point of view. And what is yours, Paula? Has the prospect no pleasure for you?'

'Has the prospect no pleasure for me?' she repeated. 'Ask the starving dog if a meal has no pleasure for him—the drowning man if he cares for a helping hand—the outcast if he would like to enter Paradise. Oh, Hal, if you only knew how desolate, how unsatisfied, how hopeless my life has been.'

'And you can *love* me, Paula?' he asked quickly.

'I can—I *do*, Hal. You worked your way into my heart long ago, and reign there as no other man has ever done. Only—'

'I will hear of no "*onlies*,"' exclaimed Hal Rushton gaily. 'I have won the woman of my heart, and no one shall forbid the banns. Oh, Paula, if you knew the difference your coming home to Highbridge Farm will make to me. How often I have looked longingly at your lighted window, as I walked past it in the evenings, and wondered if I should ever have the courage to

woo its inmate to take me and all my belongings under her care. For I am no fit companion for you, Paula. I am only a rough farmer, who wouldn't learn when he had the opportunity, and you are so clever, and well-educated and refined. How will you bear with me? Sha'n't I seem very bearish and uncouth to you when we live side by side?'

'I don't judge you as you do yourself, Hal. I think much more of your manliness, and upright dealing, and warm, generous heart than of a college education. And if you knew how I have come to detest what Mr Gribble calls "learning," since I have been forced to teach, I think, if I am ever freed from the necessity,' said Paula, with a contented laugh, 'that I shall never open a book again.'

'You shall never do anything but what you feel inclined to do,' replied her lover, 'once you have consented to gladden my lonely life. Oh, Paula, what a long vista of happiness lies before us. This is no sudden passion on my part, darling, born of your sweet face and sweeter ways.

It is an affection of the growth of months, founded on a real esteem for your character. How I have admired the patience and steadiness and solid worth with which you have lived a very difficult life here, and surmounted all its unpleasantnesses. But this is the very last you shall be subjected to, Paula. In a month—at the very time when that little brute Gribble hopes to see you turned out upon the world without a situation—you will become my wife, and take a higher position in Deepdale than either he or any of your persecutors can attain to. Promise to marry me in a month, Paula.'

But at that she looked troubled.

'*A month*, Hal. Oh! that will be too soon. I cannot give up my engagement under a month, and then I must go home to see my mother, and—and—to consult her.'

'Why can't you consult her by letter, Paula? Surely you will not defer that for a month. And then—it is not as if you were a very young girl, who had never lived by herself, but you have been knocking about the world, according to your

own account, for some years, so why shouldn't we be married first, and go and visit your mother together, eh? It would make a charming wedding trip. What do you say to it?'

And he put his arm fondly round her waist as he spoke. But Paula shrunk from him.

'My mother would not like it,' she said awkwardly, 'and I should have some arrangements to make first. Besides, Hal, are you sure we know enough of one another yet to enter on so serious an engagement? If I were away a month, there are so many things that I could write to you—things that would make you understand me better, perhaps, and—'

'Nonsense!' He interrupted her with a kiss. 'I don't want to understand you better, Paula; there will be plenty of time for that afterwards. It would be stupid to start in life with nothing left to do—no little discoveries to make, no little surprises to find out. It is these things that will keep us fresh to our dying day. But how solemn you look over it, darling. If *I* am satisfied, surely you might be!'

'But am I, then,' said Paula, with tremulous lips, 'am I, then, to prepare myself for finding out a lot of things about *you*, Hal?'

He laughed heartily.

'I hope not. I don't think I've ever done anything very dreadful, or that I should mind your knowing; but you will be welcome to the whole history, if it interests you. I shall never keep anything from you, Paula. That seems the sweetest and the most real part of marriage, in my eyes. One heart and one mind as well as one body. I hope you think so too.'

'It cannot be a true nor a complete marriage without,' she answered; 'only—'

'Well, out with it. No secrets, my sweetest, between us now.'

'Have you ever loved anybody before me, Hal?'

'*Never!*' he said emphatically. 'Have *you?*'

'No—at least, not as I love you. Once I may have thought I loved, but now I know that I have never felt one tithe of the passion. Oh! you are too good to me. I am not worthy of

such trust and confidence as you have placed in me. I might have been anybody—anything.'

'Yes, you *might*, but you *are not*, you see. Therein lies the difference.'

'But if I had been,' she persisted, 'would you have loved me all the same?'

He looked grave as he answered,—

'I don't think I should have been able to help loving you, whatever you were, you seem so very much to have been made for me. But I confess that if I heard you had been engaged before, or very much in love before, it would take off a considerable amount of charm from our present position. I must have you all to myself, Paula—past, present, and future—something to call my very own for Time and for Eternity. But you have given yourself to me, and I am satisfied. Well, darling, I suppose I must be going now, or we shall have a council of morality sitting on our doings to-morrow morning.'

He stood up and folded her closely in his arms.

'Good-night, my Paula, and God bless you,

I won't worry you any more this evening, but think over what I have said, and see if you can't manage to make me happy in a month from to-day. Not but what I am the happiest man in Deepdale now,' he added, with a bright smile at the door, 'only—I want *you—you—you*—and you only and for ever in my arms.'

He had scarcely closed it and turned his back upon the schoolhouse before he heard an agitated voice pronounce his name.

'Hal, Hal, come back.' He turned at once and re-entered the porch where Paula, with scared eyes and a generally wild appearance, was awaiting him. 'Don't go yet,' she said breathlessly. 'Stop a minute. I must speak to you.'

She almost dragged him over the threshold, and closing the door, stood up against it like a hunted animal defying its pursuers. Hal Rushton became alarmed.

'What have I said or done to make you look at me like this?' he asked.

'Nothing — nothing. You are only too kind, too good, too trusting,' she answered, 'but you

must not go till I have told you something. You shall not hold yourself engaged to me till you have heard that—that I'm not what I seem. I am not called Miss Stafford. My name is—is—'

'You are not called "Miss Stafford"?' he reiterated in his surprise. 'Have you been passing amongst us, then, under a false name?'

'Yes. That is, the situation demanded a single woman, and I thought it best—I thought—'

'You are *not*, then, single?' he said sternly.

'Oh, yes, I am free (what would you have thought of me else?), but I *have* been married, Hal. My real name is Madame Bjornsën, and—and—I am a mother.'

She dropped her eyes as she made the confession, feeling that it might hurt his vanity, but she was little prepared for the storm it evoked. Hal Rushton bounded towards her as though he would have overwhelmed her.

'You have been married!' he exclaimed in a voice of repugnance. 'You are not a maiden! You are a widow, and a mother! How *dared* you come here to deceive us all!'

'Oh, Hal, be merciful. It was in order to earn my bread. How could I tell that anyone would be injured by it?' she cried, cowering before his angry eyes.

'How could you tell?' he echoed sarcastically. 'How can you tell when you put your foot down upon a hapless beetle that its life will be crushed out beneath your heel? You came here amongst us as an innocent, artless girl—something to be wooed and won as a man's first love, to be worn as *his only*, pure, sacred and unpolluted. I could have sworn that your looks and words were virginal. How basely you have deceived us. And you saw my love was settling itself on you (you have confessed as much), and not only mine, but that of half-a-dozen other fools in Deepdale, who were attracted by the simple, girlish charms of *Miss Stafford*, little thinking they were letting their affections drift upon a married woman.'

'I *am not* married!' exclaimed Paula hotly. 'I told you that I *had been*, but it was all over long ago, and, were it not for the little child, I need not have told you at all. Oh, Hal, don't

look at me like that! Had I been *sure* that you would have spoken to me as you have done to-day, I would have told you of it from the beginning. I speak the truth in saying I did not think my reticence would injure anyone. I took my mother's counsel in acting as I did. If you will only listen to me—'

'I do not want to listen to you. I am too deeply hurt and disappointed. Consider everything I have said to you to-night unsaid. My words were meant for Paula Stafford—not for the widow of Monsieur Bjornsën (or whatever the fellow's name may have been).'

Paula drew herself up proudly.

'That is for your own decision,' she replied, 'and you will never find me try to make you alter it. But, in justice to myself, you shall not leave me until you have heard the truth. My father died many years ago, leaving my mother in necessitous circumstances, and when I was eighteen she was glad to marry me to Carl Bjornsën, a Swedish gentleman, and master of a trading vessel, the *Lily of Christiansand*. I married him with my

own consent. He was good-looking, and apparently fond of me, and after a certain fashion I liked him. That my marriage turned out a very unfortunate one, and made me a miserable woman, will have no interest for you, perhaps, but it may account for my wish — when I returned to my mother's protection, with my poor baby on my hands—to cast all remembrance of the past behind me. My husband was a drunkard and an evil liver, and I was unprovided for. It was necessary I should work to support myself and my child, and I came to Deepdale in order to do so. That is all of my history that concerns you or anyone; but it is due to myself that you should learn why I changed my name, and led you into the unfortunate mistake of believing me to be a single woman.'

She abandoned her position at the door as she concluded, and walked wearily to the table. Perhaps she thought that Hal Rushton would follow her, and retract his words. But he did not. His feelings had been too much outraged by her confession. He pounced upon the handle as soon as

it was free, and turned it eagerly, as though all his desire was to escape from her presence.

'I am sorry for your troubles, Madame Bjornsën, he replied coldly, 'and I trust you may find a way out of them, but it would have been better for all parties if your fit of honesty had come on sooner. As it is, your reticence has ruined my life as completely as your own. Good-bye!'

And clapping his felt hat on his head, Hal Rushton, with his heart all afire, turned out of the schoolhouse and commenced to walk rapidly towards Highbridge Farm.

Paula sat where he had left her—stunned and hopeless. Everything seemed over now. She felt as if the world had receded from her like a great ocean, and she was standing on a rock, isolated and alone, watching the waves go further and further away. Her situation was gone, and her lover, and both from the same reason—the horrible influence which her marriage with Carl Bjornsën had left behind it. It was useless to curse her past folly or her present ill-fortune. She had done that so often that she

was sick of it. All that remained was to take up the burden again where she had dropt it, and toil on anew. After all, there was Paul—poor, stricken little Paul—to think of and work for, and her mother, thank Heaven, however poor, was always glad to see her face again. And so Paula Bjornsën, on retiring to rest, tried determinately to blot out the handsome, wrathful face of Hal Rushton from her imagination, and to think only of those two who were legitimately her own, and whom she was destined so soon to see again.

CHAPTER VI.

HIGHBRIDGE FARM.

HIGHBRIDGE FARM stood on the summit of the hill which formed one side of the valley of Deepdale, and was by far the most important building in the neighbourhood. It had been in the possession of the Herefords (Hal Rushton's mother's family) for upwards of two centuries before it fell, by marriage, into old Mr Rushton's hands, and it was he who had changed its name from Highbridge Hall to Highbridge Farm, as more consonant with his occupation. It was a long, low house of red brick, darkened to shades of brown and purple with the progress of the centuries, and possessed a slated roof overlaid with a thick thatch. Its outer walls were covered with creepers, which clung lovingly to it without

the help of list or nails. Its windows were gabled and lattice-paned, the front door was protected by a deep porch, and the stables and outhouses were all in keeping with the principal edifice. Inside, the rooms were large and lofty—the sitting-rooms greatly exceeding in number those usually required for a farmer's establishment, and the sleeping apartments built all round the upper portion of the house, with each one opening into the other, as used to be the custom in the days of night alarms from highwaymen. Outside, the grounds were capacious, although much of that formerly devoted to pleasure had been annexed by the late owner for agricultural purposes. Still, enough of the old shrubberies remained to make a very decent clump of trees around the garden, which bloomed with all sorts of old-fashioned flowers. The house was rather sparsely furnished, and the furniture was old-fashioned and worn. Young Mr Rushton had not cared to renovate the place for the convenience of his stepmother and her son, and as for himself, he was scarcely ever in it. His

great hobby was riding to hounds, and during the hunting season he spent half his time out of doors. The stables were consequently what he took interest in (leaving most of the farming operations to the sagacity of his bailiff), and Mrs Rushton was always prophesying that he would live to repent of his folly. But, then, everything that the young owner of Highbridge Farm did was folly in the eyes of his step-mother. How he came to keep so unpleasant a person about the premises was a matter of wonder to most of his acquaintance—and how his father had ever established her there, a still greater. But old Mr Rushton had not been of such good blood as his first wife, and after her death he dropt into the habit of associating with persons of a much lower grade. Mrs Snaley had been one of them. Her first husband was nothing better than a herdsman, and she had been a laundress and sick-nurse, and accustomed since her widowhood to come in and superintend the domestic affairs of Highbridge Farm when the owner had one of his spells of

sickness. She was a cross-eyed, cat-like creature, ugly to a degree, and still more coarse than she was ugly, but she made excellent beef-tea and custard puddings, and knew exactly how much sugar and port wine to put into a cup of arrowroot—how to minister, in fact, to all those little comforts the neglect of which convert a sickbed into a purgatory. And Mr Rushton had been very sick for many years before he died—ailing from an internal disease which rendered his life miserable, whilst it did not confine him to his bed. Mrs Snaley, with her freckled complexion, green eyes and sandy hair, may not have appeared an angel in his eyes, but he was certainly much more comfortable and better looked after when she was by his side. And so the foolish old man, instead of engaging her as a housekeeper, took it into his head to marry her. Hal had been a lad at school at the time, and was, moreover, too young to express an opinion upon the matter, but Deepdale expressed it for him. Everybody of any respectability in the place, from the vicar (who

had *not* married him, for the widow had been deep enough to persuade him to have the knot tied in the neighbouring parish), to the magistrate of Haltham, were *down* on the old man for his infatuation; but it was useless shutting the stable door when the steed was stolen. Mrs Snaley, the herdsmen's widow, had been transformed into Mrs Rushton, the rich farmer's wife, and drove about in her phaeton like a lady. She held her head very high in those days, and Edward Snaley, her ugly son, who was the image of herself, boasted of the luxuries he enjoyed, and the prospects he looked forward to, as if he had been the heir to Highbridge Farm itself. And so, at one time, he threatened to be. Whence comes the mysterious influence that ill-favoured and unpleasant and coarse women—yes, and even stupid women — sometimes gain over the most sober-minded and clear-headed of men, until they can actually twist them round their little finger? It is not only the lower classes who are taken in this way. Men of high birth have often been known to live and die under such

an influence; and whatever it may be, Eliza Snaley possessed it to a large degree, so it is no wonder that old Rushton succumbed to her desires like a lamb. She so worked upon his feelings, and his belief in her integrity, that not long after their marriage he made a will leaving the whole of the property at her disposition, and his son Hal completely at her mercy. But Mrs Rushton's exultation in this fact overrode her prudence. She could not keep it to herself. She boasted of it everywhere, and soon went so far, when in an ill-temper, as to taunt the rightful heir with his dependence on herself, and to promise him, as soon as his father was gone, she would turn him out of Highbridge Farm. Hal was a tall stripling of eighteen at that time, well able to understand the rights and wrongs of such a matter, and he carried his stepmother's story to the unbelieving ears of Mr Measures. The good vicar could not comprehend any parent being so totally unjust, and he took an early opportunity to question the old farmer on the subject.

'There's an ugly report going about Deepdale concerning you, Mr Rushton,' he commenced.

'Indeed, Mr Measures, and what may that be?'

'That you have left your house and all your farm property to your present wife.'

'Well, sir, and who has a better right to it?'

'Your son—most decidedly, your son, Mr Rushton. Do you forget that Highbridge Farm is Hereford property? It will be a perfect scandal if Hal doesn't inherit what his mother brought to you.'

Mr Rushton was a very obstinate man. He closed his lips firmly together, and was silent.

'I sincerely trust I have been wrongly informed,' continued Mr Measures, 'for all Deepdale would be up in arms against you—in fact, I am not sure that it might not be made a question of law.'

'You don't know anything about it, Mr Measures,' replied the old man roughly; 'the property came to me without any conditions, and is mine to do exactly as I like with, and I shall leave it to whom I choose.'

The vicar grew very indignant.

'No, Mr Rushton,' he exclaimed, rising from his chair. 'It is *not* yours to do exactly as you like with, and if you persist in leaving an unjust will behind you, you will hear these words repeated before the Judgment-seat of God. There are many fathers like you in the world, who consider they owe no obligation to the children they have brought into it; but they will find hereafter that as they have sown so they will reap, and they will receive the same justice they have meted out to others. You are an old man, Mr Rushton, and you are a very sick man, who may be called away any day. I hope, before your summons comes, that you will think better of this most iniquitous intention.'

And, seething with righteous indignation, Mr Measures left the old farmer to ponder over what he had said. It was not a pleasant retrospection. Mr Rushton knew he was dying, but he was exceedingly frightened of death, and still more of what might come after it, and the vicar's words had great weight with him. He thought them over until he made himself quite ill, and his wife

discovered the cause of his distress. At that ensued such a violent scene that she quite 'put herself out of court' (as the saying is), and made her husband's opinions veer round like a weathercock. He sent, all in a hurry, for the solicitor from Haltham, had a fresh will (in which he bequeathed his late wife's property to her son) drawn up, and it was signed and witnessed in the vicar's presence the same day.

'But don't leave me alone with Eliza after this,' said old Rushton querulously to Mr Measures, 'for it would kill me. I couldn't stand it. Promise to stay with me till the end. The vicar did promise him, and fulfilled his promise, for the end came all too soon. Before nightfall the excited and weakened invalid had passed away, and Highbridge Farm was the property of Hal Rushton, his stepmother being left one hundred a year for life, chargeable to the estate, and her son Edward Snaley—nothing. How much the widow loved the vicar after this episode may be well imagined. She hated the very ground he walked on, and never lost an opportunity of abusing him and his

inoffensive, kind-hearted wife, who she designated as a couple of vipers who had turned her poor dear husband's heart against her at the last, and shut his eyes to the vices of her stepson Hal Rushton. But she was far too cunning to air her opinions before anybody better disposed than Mrs Gribble or Mrs Axworthy. At the time of his father's death, Hal Rushton had been too young to foresee the disadvantages that might accrue from this woman and her son remaining at Highbridge Farm, and though Mr Measures saw it for him, he did not like to check the generosity that dictated the oversight. The young man had obtained his rights, and his was not a heart to harbour enmity. So, without any positive understanding being arrived at on the subject, Mrs Rushton and Ted Snaley had stayed on and on, until they had come to consider their occupation of the farm as a right. It was now eight years since his father had died, and his stepmother was complete mistress of his establishment. She ordered the dinners, engaged or dismissed the servants, bought or exchanged articles as seemed

good to her, and behaved in every respect as she had done during the lifetime of his father. Of late years, indeed, Hal had sometimes contemplated the advisability of a change in this respect, but the immediate necessity had not arisen, and meanwhile, like most young men, he was glad enough to have the petty cares of domestic life taken off his hands, and to be able to spend his time as he chose. So Mrs Rushton considered her position impregnable. Even if her stepson took it into his head to marry Miss Stafford (and his frequent visits to the schoolhouse had not been unnoticed by Ted Snaley, who carried every tale he could hear against Hal to his mother), she did not anticipate being ousted from her place of honour. But it was her object to prevent such a marriage taking place by every means in her power, and had she known how many sweet dreams Hal had indulged in of late of having the old house all to himself, with Paula moving about it as sole mistress, she would have been still more anxious to make a rupture between them. It was two mornings after their last troubled interview,

and poor Hal was not in the best of humours. In his idea, all hope was over, and the girl he loved had disappeared to make way for a woman who had deceived him. What else might not be hidden in that dark background which Paula had taken such pains to conceal? He had brooded over it all night, and at breakfast time he was moody and depressed. The breakfast parlour at Highbridge Farm was a charming, low-roofed, long room, with six windows, all on one side, looking into the garden. Each of these windows, with their diamond-latticed panes, had a broad seat beneath it, that opened like a box, and was supposed to store the table linen. Outside the latticed panes hung vine tendrils and clematis flowers and the baby fruit of an old pear tree, and the windows were open, and the sweet breath of the roses and mignonette of June passed through them and etherealised everything. Mrs Rushton needed etherealising. Her iron-grey hair, coarse and thin, looked as if it had never been brushed before it was tucked away under a dirty widow's cap, which she still persisted in wearing, and her black gown

was rusty with age. Her son Ted was not more festively attired. He wore a patched suit of tweed, and his red-rimmed ferrety eyes kept turning quickly from his mother to his handsome stalwart stepbrother, who, clothed in a suit of grey knicker-bockers, was perhaps looking his best, although the dogged mood with which he stuck to the perusal of his morning paper proved he was not in an amiable frame of mind. The contrast between the two young men was very great, and all the more so because Ted Snaley was deformed, having been let fall as an infant, and a subsequent weakness of the spine developing into a hump back. Persons thus afflicted are seldom sweet-tempered. The difference between themselves and their more fortunate fellow-creatures strikes them with a sense of injustice, and Ted was no exception to the rule. Indeed, his deformity, added to a naturally evil nature, made him positively malevolent.

'Well, and what's the matter with *you?*' inquired Mrs Rushton in an unpleasant tone as she jerked a cup of tea towards her stepson.

'Nothing,' he answered curtly.

'Indeed. You're very silent for *nothing*, it strikes me,' rejoined the lady.

'If you wish me to speak, I have something to say,' said Hal. 'Who ordered Sam to put my new mare into the tax-cart yesterday evening to fetch home bread from Haltham?'

'*I* did,' replied Mrs Rushton coolly. 'I left my baking for half-an-hour to that fool Sarah, and she spoilt the whole batch. We had no bread for supper. I was obliged to send to Haltham.'

'But not by my mare, that I've just paid sixty pounds for.'

'Well, Sam said she would go quickest, and there was no time to spare. What are horses for if not to use?'

'Perhaps. But I don't allow my stables to be used at random, and in future, if anything is required from Haltham, the pony must go for it.'

The widow tossed her head.

'Dear me,' she ejaculated, 'one would think I wasn't mistress in my own house.'

'You took the mare fast enough when you wanted to drive the school teacher into Haltham,' said Ted Snaley maliciously.

'Thank you, Ted. I don't want any of your remarks upon the subject. My stables are my own, and I shall do as I please with them.'

'Oh, yes, your stables are your own, and everything else is your own,' exclaimed Mrs Rushton. 'We know that well enough without your telling us, Hal, though it was the last thing *I* expected when I devoted my life to your sick father, and I and my poor child have no part in it all. But I think you might consider the necessities of your relatives before the comfort of your horses. But, of course, *we* are not Miss Stafford.'

'I don't know why you keep on harping upon Miss Stafford,' replied Hal quietly. 'I suppose one may offer a neighbour a seat in one's carriage without being called upon to account for it. Miss Stafford and I are nothing to each other, and I beg you will cease your allusions to her.'

'I should hope, indeed, that you *are* nothing to each other,' retorted his stepmother. 'An arrant

hussy, who is going to be turned out of her situation for improper conduct.'

Hal sprung to his feet with his face all aflame.

'How *dare* you speak of her like that? What do you know about Miss Stafford or her conduct?'

'You needn't flare up about it so. We know a great deal too much. Mr and Mrs Gribble—'

'Mr and Mrs Gribble,' interrupted Hal, 'a couple of low-minded slanderers.'

'I won't hear two godly, pious people talked of after that fashion, Hal. They have only spoken the truth, and though I've no opinion of Mr Measures, he knows it to be so, and the young woman is to go.'

'Yes, because she had two men in to supper with her last Tuesday, at twelve o'clock at night,' added young Snaley eagerly, 'and she picked them up in the streets at Haltham.'

'*It's a lie!*' cried Hal fiercely, 'a barefaced and unmitigated lie! Miss Stafford is as pure and good a woman as ever stepped God's earth. I can swear to it!'

Her wrong against himself seemed to dwindle

into nothing compared with this infamous slander. He felt as if he could do battle against the whole world to clear her name and reputation.

'Oh, it's no good denying it,' replied Mrs Rushton, 'for facts is facts, and Mr Gribble saw the men with his own eyes. But why should you make such a to-do about it? You say she's nothing to you, and a good job too, for though you've robbed me of my rightful dues, Hal Rushton, I don't want to see you fooled into bringing a girl like that into the house. In fact, I wouldn't stand it.'

'You would have the alternative,' said Hal curtly; 'you could choose another home.'

'Oh, where's the call to talk such nonsense, when she's nothing to you?' returned his step-mother, thinking she had gone too far. 'She's a disgrace to the parish, and she's turned out of it. I hear there was thirty scholars less than usual at school this morning, and Mr Axworthy says he shouldn't wonder if to-morrow it was shut up altogether. However, she'll be gone soon enough, I reckon. She's not likely to stay

to the end of her month with nothing to do. She'll take her money and be off—and a good riddance, I say.'

'*Who* told you she was going at once?' demanded Hal.

'Well, it isn't likely she'll stay to be hooted at. The boys are ready to break her windows already, for the way she's gone on.'

'The boys had better let me catch them at anything of the sort. They won't have a whole bone left in their bodies,' growled Hal. 'The fact is, none of you can appreciate Miss Stafford, because she's so far above you. She's a lady, and I don't know another in Deepdale, except Mrs Measures. None of you know what ladies' habits are. You judge of her actions by your own.'

'*Ladies' habits*,' reiterated Mrs Rushton, with a sneer, 'I hope not, indeed, if they're such as *hers*. Receiving men at dead of night, and refusing to give up their names. It's infamous, in my ideas, but I was always brought up respectable and pious.'

'You couldn't have been brought up more respectably than Miss Stafford,' retorted Hal. '*I* know who the men were well enough.'

'*You* know!' cried the widow, 'and when she wouldn't tell the parson.'

'It was Mr Gribble and Mr Axworthy whom she refused to tell, and not Mr Measures.'

'And who might they be, then, pray?'

Hal hesitated a moment. He knew no more than she did who Seth Brunt was, or why he came to the schoolhouse, but Paula's obstinacy was likely to peril a reputation that was still dear to him, and for her sake he resorted to a subterfuge.

'One was an old servant of her family, who visited her to ask for charity, and the other was—myself. Now, you can make what you like out of it.'

'He! he! he!' giggled Ted Snaley, 'I always said you was sweet on the teacher.'

'Hold your tongue!' thundered Hal, 'unless you want to have your ears boxed. I will have no liberties taken with her name or mine.'

have told you before that Miss Stafford is a lady, and in my presence you must speak of her as such.'

And so saying he threw down his newspaper and stalked out of the room.

'There's a temper for you!' cried the widow.

'He *is* sweet on her, mother, you mark my words. I've watched him leaning on her window sill of an evening, and talking to her through the open window, scores of times. And what a wax he gets in if her name's mentioned. I wonder if he'll speak to her before she leaves Deepdale.'

'Not he,' replied his mother contemptuously; 'he's too much like his old fool of a father. It takes him a precious time to make up his mind.'

'The old man wasn't long making up his mind to alter his will,' observed Ted slily.

'No, drat him! but the parson was at the bottom of that. But, bless you! Hal's not a marrying man. He thinks too much of his horses and his hunting. He ought to have been brought up a stable boy. And why should he marry? I'm sure he's comfortable enough as he is.'

'It'll be a bad day for me if he does. There'll be no chance of my coming into the farm then.'

'My poor wronged boy,' quoth Mrs Rushton compassionately, 'if he'd any idea of justice, he'd have halved it with you. But there, he's his father over again, so where's the use of talking? The only thing we can do is to lay by a little for you against you want it.'

And in truth Mrs Rushton *was* laying by, *not* a little, for the use of her own son. Hal Rushton paid such bills as she presented to him without inquiring into their items, though he sometimes fancied in a vague way that the house should be more comfortable for the expenditure. Meanwhile nearly half of his ready-money went into the savings bank to make a nest egg for Edward Snaley. The shabby attire of both mother and son was due to the same cause. Every penny that could be scraped together went to swell the little hoard. Even under the widow's repulsive face and manners there burned the Divine, inextinguishable flame of a mother's love.

CHAPTER VII.

PAULA LEAVES DEEPDALE.

MRS MEASURES would have followed Paula Stafford to the schoolhouse that very evening if her husband had not prevented it. He had told the girl to take a couple of days to think over the matter, and he would not let his wife interfere with her till the time was up. Meanwhile he felt very depressed about it all. He had not the least suspicion that the teacher had been guilty of any impropriety, but her reticence and obstinacy puzzled and grieved him. Doubtless she had some good reason for refusing to speak, but that assurance would not satisfy his churchwardens, and he foresaw that he should lose an admirable assistant in the school, and one which he should not easily replace. Mrs Measures, on

the contrary, anticipated no such evil consequences, and rallied her husband on his want of circumspection.

'Can't you see, dear,' she said, 'that she only held her tongue in order to annoy Mr Gribble? And I don't wonder at it. Such a presuming, impertinent, arbitrary little man as he is. I often question, Edward, why you permit him to hold his office. He is quite unfit for it.'

'I don't see that, Mary. He is very zealous, and in this instance, although he is hard and suspicious, he is perfectly just. Miss Stafford should *not* receive any visitors whose names she is ashamed to acknowledge.'

'Who said she was *ashamed* to acknowledge them? Why, Edward, you are becoming as hard as Mr Gribble. Miss Stafford confessed openly that Hal Rushton had been with her. It was only the sailor whose identity she preferred to keep to herself.'

'And what business can she have with *sailors?* I don't quite like it, Mary. I wish it had never occurred.'

'So do I, but I cannot regard it as such a terrible misfortune. I am going to call on Miss Stafford after school this evening, and I am sure she will tell me everything that is necessary for us to know.'

'I hope so, my dear. I shall have a very poor opinion of her else. She seemed very determined the other day, but she may have thought better of it since.'

Mrs Measures felt quite sure of it, and rapped at the schoolhouse door that evening in full faith that everything would have been set right before she left it again. It was just past five o'clock. The scholars had not been dismissed above a few minutes, and the woman whose business it was to keep the schoolroom clean was already opening the windows and sweeping away the dust caused by their fidgeting little feet. She curtsied as she saw the vicar's wife, and remarked that it was a beautiful day, and there hadn't been but a handful of scholars in for afternoon school. Mrs Measures had hardly time to notice her remark before Miss Stafford herself had opened

the side door in answer to her knock. She was looking very pale, and her eyes were red with weeping, but she coloured faintly when she saw who was standing there.

'Mrs Measures,' she faltered, 'I am so sorry. My room is so untidy. It is hardly fit to ask you in to.'

'Never mind untidiness,' replied Mrs Measures cheerfully, as she stept over the threshold. 'I did not come to look at your room, my dear, but to talk to yourself.' But as she caught sight of the school teacher's boxes, and all the preparations for packing them strewn about the room, she looked surprised. 'Why, what is this? Surely you are not making ready to leave us?'

'Indeed, I am, Mrs Measures. I told Mr Measures the other evening that he might as well give me my notice at once, as there is nothing for me to do but to go.'

'But, my dear,' said the vicar's wife, taking possession of a chair, 'this is childish of you. Even if you eventually decide to leave us, you must take a month's notice. You are entitled to it.'

'I do not wish to take it, Mrs Measures. I am going at once. There is nothing left here for me to do. There were not more than a dozen children at school this afternoon, and they behaved so impertinently that it is evident I have lost my control over them. I was going to write to the vicar to-night, and ask him to find a substitute for me at once. I cannot submit to be insulted by my own scholars.'

'Most certainly not,' cried the lady warmly, 'and I only wish the vicar had been by to hear it. But now, let us have a talk together over this affair. It seems that the only obstacle to an understanding between us is your refusal to give up the name of the stranger who visited you on that unfortunate evening. Now, is your objection to do this quite insuperable? Will you not confide it to *me?*'

For a moment Paula was irresolute. Why should she not tell this kind friend everything, and secure a woman's sympathy and advice? But to what end? She had lost her lover, and her situation (for without the one she could never

retain the other), and what good should she gain by leaving her sad history behind her to serve food for Deepdale gossip? So she stood there silently and shook her head.

'It seems incomprehensible to me,' continued the vicar's wife in a vexed tone, 'that you should be so obstinate about it. I feel sure there was nothing wrong in his visit; but why should you keep his name and business such a mystery?'

'I daresay it *does* seem incomprehensible to you, madam,' said Paula sadly, 'but perhaps your life has led to no necessity for concealments.'

'No, indeed; but why should yours? Such a girl as you are too—'

'Oh, I am not such a girl as you think me, and my past life has been both unhappy and eventful. It is unnecessary you should know mine. This man was connected with it, and to disclose his business with me would be to tell a great deal that concerns myself alone. Is not this sufficient,' replied Paula, 'and especially since I shall leave Deepdale so soon and for ever?'

She had finished the sentence with difficulty,

and at the close of it she burst into tears. Mrs Measures was affected. She thought the teacher had suffered some disappointment in love.

'My poor child,' she said affectionately, 'you are unhappy, I can see that, and I feel for you.'

Paula's answer was to fling herself at the knees of the vicar's wife.

'Oh, madam, I *am* unhappy—deeply, miserably so—though not from my own fault so much as from that of others. Pity me if you will, but pray do not condemn me. In a few days I shall be far away from Deepdale, and I would like to think that you at least did not believe me to be in the wrong. That man was connected with my past life. He brought me a message from a person whom I never wished to hear from again—whom I never shall see again. To disclose his name would be to give up a clue to a past I am doing my utmost to forget. That is the sole reason of my silence. Do you believe me?'

'Yes, my dear, I do believe you, and I am very sorry for you. You were born for better things

than this. Edward and I always said so from the beginning.'

'Oh, no; I am obliged to work, for I have others dependent on me, and I have been grateful for the peace and kindness I have met with here. But now it is over. I must leave Deepdale, and the sooner I go the better. How soon do you think that Mr Measures will set me free?'

Mrs Measures sighed.

'I cannot say. What he will do without you I do not know. But it is folly to throw away your legal notice and salary.'

'I want neither. I have sufficient money to get back to my friends, and I cannot stay a day longer than is necessary.'

'*Where* are your friends? *Who* are they?' demanded Mrs Measures.

'My mother lives in Devonshire,' replied Paula vaguely.

The vicar's wife was not satisfied with the interview, and felt she had signally failed in her mission. She knew no more than when she entered the schoolhouse, and it was evident that

Miss Stafford intended to leave them. So she said, with rather less interest,—

'Of course, we cannot keep you here against your will, my dear, but I think you would be wise to reconsider your decision. Why not stay out your month? There is no knowing what might happen in the interim. Let me tell the vicar that you will do so much.'

'No, no,' cried Paula feverishly; 'I feel that I must go without delay. I shall be miserable till I am out of the place. There are other reasons—'

'*Other reasons?*' repeated Mrs Measures inquisitively.

'Yes—no. I hardly know what I am talking about. This business has completely upset me,' replied Paula. 'Only—I must go home to my mother. I must go at once. I cannot stay here a day longer.'

'Very well,' said her visitor, rising, 'then I will tell Mr Measures your decision. He will be very disappointed, I know; but, of course, we cannot interfere with your private feelings. Good-bye, my dear. I am sorry—*very* sorry—but we must hope it is all for the best.'

And with this well-meant but unsatisfactory aphorism Mrs Measures took her leave. She was sincerely hurt at the upshot of her visit, and her faith in her *protégée* was somewhat shaken. Paula's impetuous words had rendered the mystery still more mysterious. What could there be so dreadful in her past that she feared the discovery of a clue to it? Her half-explanation had made the matter worse instead of better, and Mrs Measures determined to keep that part of their interview to herself. As she was strolling thoughtfully towards the vicarage she encountered Hal Rushton, wandering in an aimless way about the village, with a couple of Irish setters at his heels. He had been gloomy and depressed ever since the conversation with his stepmother at the breakfast table that morning, wondering what he could do to stop the scandal concerning Paula, or if he could make up his mind to see her again and warn her of the detriment to her character. When he perceived the vicar's wife, he doffed his hat and slightly smiled. Everyone in Deepdale loved Mrs Measures except the late Mrs Snaley.

'Well, Mr Rushton,' she commenced kindly, 'and how are you getting on? I have just come from seeing Miss Stafford at the schoolhouse. I am sorry to say she holds to her decision, and is determined to leave us. It is a great pity. It will leave a kind of blot upon her name for ever. Now, *you* are a friend of hers. I wonder if you could induce her to think better of it.'

Hal began to stammer at once.

'*I*, Mrs Measures. If *you* have failed, it is hardly likely *I* should succeed. But she will not get leave, I suppose, under a month?'

'Indeed, she will. She is going at once, without notice or salary. I found her already packing her trunks. She seems terribly upset, and very unhappy. Poor girl, I fancy her life has not been a very bright one.'

'Did she tell you anything about it?' inquired Hal.

'Not in so many words, but she hinted a great deal. And vexed as I am at her obstinacy in leaving Deepdale, I cannot help thinking of the time she has passed with us with admiration.

How faithfully she has worked in the schoolroom, sparing neither time nor trouble. Mr Measures will feel lost when she is gone. And all the time the poor child has been toiling for others who are dependent on her, and with some carking care or anxiety hidden in her breast. I am very sorry there should be anything to conceal in her life, but I admire her beyond expression for having battled against it as she appears to have done.'

'And all the thanks she has got for it is having her character vilified from one end of Deepdale to the other,' exclaimed young Rushton excitedly.

'That is her own fault, Mr Rushton,' replied Mrs Measures; 'however innocent she may be, where there is concealment, people *will* suspect there is something wrong. And her friends, even, do not seem to stand up for her. She appears to be very much alone. She told me she was going to her mother in Devonshire, but she did not tell me her name or address.'

'Her name, we must conclude, is Mrs Stafford,' remarked Hal drily.

'So I should have said yesterday, but I could not help observing this evening that several of the articles of clothing strewn about the room were marked with the initials P. B. Perhaps I am wrong to think that "Stafford" may be only an assumed name; but where there has been one deception, there may have been another. But she is evidently in great distress, poor girl, and God forbid that I should judge her. I only feel great pity, and great regret. But I mustn't keep you any longer, Mr Rushton. Only, if you should see Miss Stafford, and feel justified in approaching the subject, *do* try and make her see the sense of not rushing off in such a hurry, which is sure to make the scandal about her ten times worse.'

Hal's heart began to beat rapidly as Mrs Measures left him. Paula going to leave Deepdale so soon, and without giving him a chance perhaps of speaking to her again. Upon the instant he began to view her conduct on the last occasion of their meeting in a more favourable light. He had been terribly hurt and dis-

appointed by the disclosure she had made to him—*so* disappointed, indeed, that for the moment he had thought she was not worthy that he should speak to her again. But he had been miserable ever since. He had regretted his harsh words as soon as they were uttered, and the idea that all intercourse between them was over was torture to him. For, after all, had she done him so great an injury by not telling him of her marriage before? Had he ever approached the subject of her past life with her, or hinted that he intended to ask her to share his future? And since there was a reason for concealing she was a widow, what right had he to suppose that she would confide to him—until the proper time came—what she had kept a secret from everybody else? *When* the moment arrived, when further concealment would have been deception, she had told it to him frankly. And, in return, instead of pitying, he had reviled her. What a brute she must think him. Was there any chance she would forgive so great an affront? Mrs Measures' words had made him look upon it all so differently

The poor girl, with her spirits and health broken from the unhappiness of the past, working bravely at an uncongenial occupation for the sake of her child and her mother—both, perhaps, dependent on her—and he had been unkind to her, and added to her burden, when all the time it was because he loved her with such a jealous passion that he could not bear to think she had ever belonged to another man. But he would conquer all such petty feelings; he would pour out his love upon her, freely and unconditionally, if she would only forgive him for the past. With this intention Hal Rushton began to walk rapidly towards the schoolhouse. He was very much in love with Paula Stafford. It is doubtful, under any circumstances, whether he could have borne their estrangement much longer, but now his heart was burning to make the quarrel up again. As he passed the latticed window, which was thrown open to the evening air, he caught a glimpse of her figure, bent over one of her travelling trunks, and his pulses beat faster at the sight of her. He went round to the door. It was

unlatched. He pushed it open, and stood upon the threshold, with a face full of entreaty.

'Paula,' he murmured in a low voice, 'Paula, forgive me!'

She turned at the sound, and flushed scarlet.

'There is nothing to forgive,' she answered sadly. 'I was bound to tell you the truth, and I am sorry that it wounded you. But it is better so. You know now what I am. I could not have accepted your offer unless you knew it.'

'But I had no right to speak to you as I did. It was jealousy made me do so—jealousy to think that any other man had ever claimed the privileges I aspire to. I have been miserable ever since. I have been unable to eat or drink for thinking of the happiness I have lost. Paula, forgive me. Forget the words I said. They were not my true sentiments. I cannot live without you, darling. Had you been married twenty times, I would still say, "Come to me and, be my wife, and let me try to make you forget the unhappiness of the past."'

He pleaded so earnestly, and his words caused such a revulsion in her feelings, that Paula sat down

on the box she had been packing and began to cry.

'Oh, my miserable life,' she moaned, 'the fatal mistake that bound me to that man—how the shadow of it has pursued me ever since. Even here, where I thought I was so safe, it has settled down upon me, and broken up the little peace and happiness that I possessed.'

'No, no, Paula, don't say that,' exclaimed Hal Rushton, as he entered the room and knelt beside her. 'Don't let it break it up. Take me back to your heart again, unworthy as I am to ask it, and let us be to each other as we were before.'

He pulled her hands down from before her face, and kissed her tears away, and she had not the moral courage to prevent him.

'But nothing is changed, Hal, remember,' she said after a while. 'I am still that hateful thing to you—a woman who has been married—who has borne a child—and nothing can ever undo it. You had better let me go, and set your heart upon some fresh young girl instead.'

'I don't want any fresh young girl. I want only *you*,' he answered fondly. 'I have been trying to argue the matter out with myself the two last days, and I have utterly failed. You are the only woman in the world that can make me happy, and I would marry you, whatever you had done, and whatever you had been. Do you understand me plainly? It must be you, and you only, or I will die a bachelor. Give me your promise back again, Paula, and say that you will be my wife.'

'I am afraid,' she sighed, 'you have frightened all my courage away. Let me go home to my mother, and when I have talked the matter over with her I will write you my decision.'

'But you won't go away *now?*' he exclaimed eagerly. 'You won't rob me of your presence just as it has become such a joy to me? Oh, Paula, no! Stay with us, darling, a little while, and then you shall give up this detestable occupation for ever. Mrs Measures met me as she was returning home, and begged me to persuade you, if possible, to relinquish your intention to

leave Deepdale—at all events until this scandal has somewhat blown over.'

Paula drew herself up rather proudly.

'I am sorry I cannot comply with Mrs Measures' request. I told her so only just now. The scandal *is* scandal, and I shall treat it with the contempt it deserves, but I cannot remain here to be insulted either by the churchwardens or my scholars. The school is in absolute revolt. I can maintain no authority nor order amongst the children, therefore I prefer to give up my salary and situation without further delay. I told Mrs Measures that I should start to-morrow.'

'*To-morrow?*' echoed the young man in a voice of despair. 'You will leave me so soon? Oh, you are cruel, Paula!'

'I think not, Hal. I think I am kind, instead. I want to give you time to think this matter over quietly, and to be sure you know your own mind. And I will think it over also, and decide if I shall be wise in trusting my future happiness to such a jealous fellow as you are.'

But she smiled as she said the words, and Hal Rushton knew that their difference was over.

'I *am* jealous,' he sighed, 'horribly and unreasonably jealous. I have been so from a child. When my father married again, and brought Mrs Snaley and her son into the house, Heaven only knows what I suffered. But I can never be jealous again of you, Paula. I know the worst now, and I feel that in yourself you will never give me cause for experiencing such a feeling.'

Paula coloured, and began to busy herself with the box.

'I shall never get my packing done in time if I chatter so much to you,' she said. 'If you want to make yourself very useful, Hal, you might find out what time the train for London leaves Haltham to-morrow morning, and if Mr Waters can spare his tax-cart to take me and my luggage into town in time to catch it.'

'Mr Waters' tax-cart will do no such thing,'

exclaimed her lover. 'If you are determined to go, *I* shall drive you into Haltham myself.'

'And leave another scandal on my name in Deepdale. Will that be wise, Hal?'

'I shall meet the scandal (if any) with the refutation that you are my promised wife.'

'No, Hal, you must not do that until we have met again. I am *not* your promised wife. I *was* last Tuesday, but you threw back my promise in my face, and I refuse to renew it so hastily. You must know my whole history before we plight our troth again. You might hear something else to trouble you. And so we will part good friends, I hope, but free as air.'

'And when are we to meet again?' inquired Hal somewhat sulkily.

'Very soon, I hope. I will go down to Grassdene, and have a little rest and peace with my mother. I want rest, Hal, after the worry and excitement of the last week. And when I have consulted her, I will write to you, and if you are of the same mind—'

'Well, what if I am of the same mind?' he said interrogatively.

'You shall come and fetch me, if you will,' she answered in a low voice.

He caught her suddenly in his arms, and strained her to his breast.

'If I will—if I will—' he repeated joyously, as he kissed her soft lips. 'You know that I will — that I would fetch you away to-day if you would only give your consent to it.'

'That would be a little too soon,' said Paula; 'besides, I will not promise anything more till you have seen my mother and poor little Paul.'

'Is that your child? But why do you call him "poor little Paul?"' he asked.

'You will understand when you see him, Hal. Don't talk of it more to-night. But remember what I said on Tuesday evening I meant, and however we may decide to act in the future, I shall be your true friend as long as my life lasts.'

She gave him her hand as she spoke, and Hal Rushton raised it reverently to his lips, and felt that, whatever the secrets of this woman's past might be, she was worthy in herself of all honour and esteem. He lingered about her for a little while longer, hoping to extract some fresh promise from her lips, but she was firm in her resolve, and he bid her good-night with a lighter heart, indeed, but still somewhat sobered by her decision. He was so fearful lest on cool deliberation she should find that she could live without him. She refused his escort into Haltham the next day, but she could not prevent his being on the platform of the railway station to see her off, nor providing her with every comfort he could think of to lessen the fatigue of the journey. Mr and Mrs Measures were exceedingly sorry to see her go, and the parishioners of Deepdale were indignant at her taking the law into her own hands, but neither of them could prevent her departure. The last thing Paula saw, as the train moved slowly out of the station, was the handsome face of Hal Rushton smiling

a farewell, and she could not help wondering to herself if she should ever see it again with such a confident, hopeful smile upon its features.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT GRASSDENE.

MRS SUTTON, Paula's mother (for Stafford was entirely an assumed name) was standing outside her cottage door at the close of that summer's evening, little dreaming that her daughter was so close at hand. Grassdene stood on an elevation above the sea, but not so far from it but that the still, glassy water, flecked here and there with a touch of creamy white, could be easily distinguished as it murmured over the pebbly shore. The village was encompassed by hills, covered with scented grass, over which the Devonshire flocks were scattered in peaceful rest. Peace, indeed, seemed to be written over the whole of the little hamlet, and Mrs Sutton, looking up at the starry heavens, wondered if her dear Paula

were enjoying herself, and wished they were together. For Paula's unfortunate history, and Paula's necessity for work, were the two bugbears of her mother's life. She took all the blame to herself of her daughter's ill-luck, whereas she had thought she was doing the best thing in the world for her when she married her to Captain Carl Bjornsën.

Mrs Sutton, the wife of a navy lieutenant, had been left a widow at an early age, to keep herself and child on a pension of seventy pounds a year. It was not living—it was a bare existence, leaving nothing over for education or luxuries. So she had established herself in this tiny cottage in Grassdene, where the common necessaries of life were cheap, and so long as people were clothed it did not signify what they wore, and set herself to the task of imparting all she knew to her daughter, and, fortunately for Paula, her mother being a well-educated and sensible woman, had been able to teach her a good deal. But when the girl was eighteen, and had grown pretty and graceful and intelligent, a young Swede, Carl Bjornsën, had

been introduced to her by some neighbours to whom he was paying a visit. He was not a *rara avis* by any manner of means, but he was fair-haired, like the generality of his people, and had china-blue eyes and a florid complexion, and was well-made and healthy; he was, moreover, in a good position as master of a trading vessel, and able to marry. Above all, he was the first man who had ever made love to Paula, and the girl considered him to be perfection. Mrs Sutton was not averse to the match. Her own health was far from strong, and her pension would die with her, and what better fortune could she expect for her daughter than to see her comfortably provided for in the event of her death. Carl Bjornsën appeared to be all that was desirable. He spoke English well, though with an accent, and he explained so clearly all he meant to do for his wife, and how short the voyage between England and Sweden was, and how often Paula would go home to see her mother, that Mrs Sutton thought her girl had gained a treasure. Paula became excited, too, at the prospect of travelling. A berth

aboard the *Lily of Christiansand*, to her who had spent all her life in Grassdene, appeared like Paradise, and she was quite willing that the marriage should take place early. She told Hal Rushton so. She said, when speaking of her marriage to him, that it took place of her own free will. So it had done—but the happiness was of short duration. Within two years she had returned to her mother's protection, a broken-down wreck—no more like the light-hearted girl that had left it than a lily trampled in the mud is like the pure and lovely flower that once raised its head amongst its garden peers. Carl Bjornsën had turned out to be that worst of all sinners, a drunkard, and violence and brutality had quickly followed upon his protestations of fidelity. Mrs Sutton had never forgiven herself for this calamity. She attributed all the misfortune to her own want of prudence and foresight, and took all the blame of her daughter's misery on her own head. She would have kept Paula and her child on her scanty pittance, and worked to increase it, if

necessary, if Paula would have permitted it. But her daughter had too much spirit and generosity for that. As soon as she was able she had gone hard to work to qualify herself for teaching, and when she gained a situation, she repaid Mrs Sutton all she thought she had cost her during the year of probation, and had sent her regular remittances for her child's expenses ever since. She was a dear, good daughter, and had deserved a better fate — so Mrs Sutton was thinking as she gazed out upon the night and wondered whose figure it could be that she saw coming over the hill towards her little cottage. For Grassdene was such a primitive place that its residents were mostly asleep by nine o'clock. As the figure commenced to run, as though expectation quickened its footsteps, Mrs Sutton walked down the garden path to meet it. 'Surely, surely,' she thought, 'it can never be my girl!'

But as the visitor approached nearer she recognised that it was.

'Paula! Paula!' she cried, hastening to

embrace her. 'My dear, what brings you home?'

'Misfortune, mother, as usual. Isn't it always misfortune that brings me to your arms? Is not my very appearance the harbinger of evil?'

'No, no, my darling, don't say that,' replied Mrs Sutton. 'I am glad you have come. I was wearying for a sight of you. But why didn't you let me know before? Have they given you a holiday?'

'Yes, dear, a very long holiday—for ever, as far as they are concerned. I have thrown up my appointment.'

'Oh, Paula, sixty pounds a year! Was it wise of you dear?'

'I don't know, mother, but I'll tell you the whole story by-and-by. Let us go in now. I have travelled all the way from Deepdale to-day, and I am so tired. I wouldn't have walked over from Lynmouth to-night only I was afraid it would be too extravagant to sleep there. How is Paul?'

'He is the same as usual, dear, and fast asleep hours ago. It is nearly ten o'clock. Come in and have something to eat, and then I will hear your story.'

She wound her arm round her daughter, and after kissing her several times, led her into the little parlour, which was very barely furnished, but had that indescribable look about it of belonging to a gentlewoman. Mrs Sutton pointed to a large bowl of wild flowers in the middle of the table.

'Poor little Paul's doing,' she said. 'He seems to care for nothing so much as gathering flowers. He is out in the fields all day by himself, and will not go to sleep till he has arranged his treasures. I don't think he has grown an inch since you saw him last, Paula.'

'Poor dear baby,' she answered softly, with something like a tear in her eye, as she touched some of the flowers in the bowl.

Mrs Sutton made her sit down, and removed her cloak and bonnet, and then she went into the little kitchen on the same floor, and returned

with a tray bearing the tea things and some bread-and-butter.

'Since you gave me no warning of your arrival, Paula, you must take what you can get,' she said. 'I have nothing but tea and bread-and-butter, except a piece of honeycomb that Mr Benson left as a present for Paul to-day.'

'Mother, dear, I want nothing but bread-and-butter,' replied Paula. 'I am almost too tired to eat, and as for poor baby's honeycomb, I wouldn't touch it for the world. Make me a cup of your famous tea, dear. That will refresh me more than anything. And don't look downcast, mother. It is true I have lost my situation, but I have good news as well as bad for you.'

'Well, eat and drink first, my dearest, and then you shall talk. I think you have grown thinner and paler lately, Paula. Have you had any fresh trouble?'

'I have had a lot of worry, mother. Who do you think came to see me the other day as an ambassador from *him?* Seth Brunt.'

Mrs Sutton almost dropped the teapot in her surprise. She forgot all her cautions to her daughter to eat first and talk afterwards as she exclaimed,—

'*Seth Brunt!* Did he actually find you out there to worry you? Oh, my Paula, when will this misery have an end?'

'Hush, mother. Brunt will never worry me again. He is dead. He was killed in a railway accident between Haltham and Bonnysett.'

"Oh, my dear, is it wrong to say thank God? I never liked that man. I distrusted his close friendship with Bjornsën. Don't you remember, on the trial, how hard he tried to influence the jury in his favour?'

'Yes, and I believe he considered him ill-used to the last. He pleaded his cause the whole time he was with me.'

'However did he come to find you out?'

'He met me, unfortunately, in Haltham on market day, and insisted on speaking to me. He frightened me by calling me "*Madame*" before some of my pupils, and I gave him leave

to come to Deepdale in order to get rid of him. But he was seen to visit me there, and all this worry has come out of it. The churchwardens insisted on my giving up his name, and I refused to do so. I could not foresee what trouble it might not lead to. I preferred to give up the situation, and so I am here. I would not have had my past raked up for all the world.'

'Oh, my dear, you were quite right. Let it die. There will be no peace for you otherwise. And Seth Brunt is dead, you say. I wish it had been the other.'

'So do I,' acquiesced Paula feverishly. 'I thought he could never do me any harm again, but whilst he lives I shall not feel safe. Seth Brunt declared to me that he *is* dying. He urged me to forgive him, to consider the possibility of returning to him, because he is at death's door—dragged down to it by his contemptible vices and dissipations.'

'And what did you answer, child?' demanded Mrs Sutton.

'I asked him if he thought I was mad, or a

fool, to go and put my head into the noose again. I asked him if he had forgotten the blows, the curses, the insults I had received; if he had forgotten Paul, blighted from his birth on account of his father's violence and cruelty. And he said he had not, but he could not forget "his poor Captain" either.'

'Bah!' cried Mrs Sutton contemptuously, 'one was as bad as the other. But I have not forgotten my poor girl. I have not forgotten. I could stand by and see that brute Bjornsën starve to death, or be beaten to death, and not move one muscle with compassion, when I remember how he took my only child from my side, and tortured her for his own pleasure. Ah! Paula, it is all very well for the world to make fun of the complaints of mothers-in-law. It should make sure, first, of how the lamb has been treated before they condemn the poor sheep for impotently butting at the eagle that is tearing it to pieces.'

'Never mind, dear mother. My life may not be over yet. I have much still to tell you. I

have left some kind friends in Deepdale, and *one* who wanted me to stay there altogether.'

There was a hesitation in her voice that aroused Mrs Sutton's suspicions. She looked up quickly in her daughter's face, and detected a slight blush upon her cheek.

'A *man*, Paula?' she exclaimed.

'Yes, dear, a man. Now don't call me a fool till you have heard all. It is Mr Rushton, whose name I have often mentioned in my letters to you. He is very different from Carl Bjornsën, you know.'

'Ah! women all think that before marriage,' replied Mrs Sutton sorrowfully. 'Paula, I shall go distracted if you marry again. Think—only *think* of what you have undergone—and do not tempt Providence a second time. *Then* you were ignorant of what brutes men can be. But now you can have no such excuse, and will go to your fate with your eyes open.'

'But, mother dear, listen,' said Paula, who, having finished her tea, had risen and seated herself on a footstool at her mother's feet. 'Hal Rushton is an English gentleman of refined

manners and cultivated mind. He has never drank to excess in his life, nor have I ever heard him use an oath. He is the owner of Highbridge Farm. I am sure I must have mentioned him to you. And he loves me, mother, as I have never been loved before,' concluded the girl as she hid her face upon her mother's lap.

'Carl Bjornsën said he loved you, Paula,' replied Mrs Sutton dubiously.

'Ah! but what did we know of Carl before I married him. We had never seen him at home, or heard what his friends said of him. We took him on his own recommendation. And foreigners are so different from Englishmen. I am sure that Hal Rushton would die sooner than strike a woman. He is all that is chivalrous and honourable and good. The vicar, Mr Measures, cannot speak too highly of him, and Mrs Measures says he is the most admirable young man in Deepdale.'

'And what do *you* say, Paula?'

'I love him, mother. I cannot help it. It came on me long before I was aware. But he is

so open and frank and generous, the wonder would be if I could have resisted loving him.'

'And you have come home to tell me that you are engaged,' said Mrs Sutton in a tone of vexation.

'No, mother, I am not. Almost the last words I said to him were that I considered myself free, and he was to consider himself so, too.'

'But marriage has been mentioned between you?'

'Yes; but it was on this wise. He proposed to me as Miss Stafford. He knew me by no other name, and he took me so much by surprise that for the moment I did not think to tell him I had been married. When I did so, he was terribly cut up by the news. He took back every word he had said to me, and I thought everything was over between us.'

'Just like a man!' interposed Mrs Sutton. 'They may have fifty loves themselves before they marry, but their wives must be as white as the undriven snow.'

'I don't think Hal quite meant that,' replied

Paula softly, 'only he was disappointed to hear I had belonged so exclusively to anyone before himself. But his jealous mood did not last long. Two days afterwards he renewed his proposals, and wanted me to renew my promises. But I refused, mother, to say anything further till I had consulted you. Hal thinks I am a widow. If he knew the truth, I doubt if he would marry me at all. What am I to do?'

'Tell him the truth, Paula, and let him go. It may save you from a lot of unhappiness. Stay with me, my dear child, and don't trust yourself again to the mercy of a man.'

'Oh, but I love him, I love him, and I shall be miserable if I have to give him up,' exclaimed Paula as she laid her head down on her clasped hands and began to cry.

'What is it you want then, my dear?' demanded her mother rather impatiently. 'How can I advise you? You must either tell him, or marry him without telling him. What else can you do?'

'Mother,' said Paula, raising her tear-stained

face to Mrs Sutton, 'how can we find out if what Seth Brunt told me is true—if Carl is really dying? If that were the case, I would wait till I was free.'

'But you *are* free, dear child, as free as the law can make you. I almost wish that you were not, and then you couldn't make a fool of yourself for the second time.'

'But all people don't hold the same opinion about divorce, and somehow I fancy that Mr Rushton would greatly object to it. Deepdale is a gossiping place, and it might create scandal. If I only knew *where* to apply for the information; but Brunt gave me no idea of his address.'

'Paula, if you are in earnest about this matter, *I* can supply you with Bjornsën's address, for he had the impudence, not long ago, to write and ask me for yours.'

'Oh, mother, what *did* you say?'

'I took no notice of his letter, but I have it by me still. He is in London.'

'Then, as soon as ever I can, I will go up

and ascertain if Brunt's account of his condition is true.'

'Indeed, Paula, you will do no such thing. Do you suppose I would allow you to expose yourself again to the insults of that drunken brute? What renewed violence might he not be guilty of if he found himself alone with you? He has never forgiven you for divorcing him, and has sunk lower and lower in his debaucheries ever since. I will not hear of your exposing yourself to such contamination.'

'But to whom can we entrust such a commission, mother? To whom can we write? I want it to be done as quietly as possible. Any further publicity would kill me.'

'My darling, it *shall* be done with the utmost secrecy. If necessary, *I* will go to London myself and find out the truth for you. You can trust your mother, can you not?'

'Oh, mother, how good you are to me! No woman ever had so good a mother before.'

'You must not say that, dear. You hurt me by it. If it had not been for my culpable, foolish

trust in that man, you might have been a free, happy girl at this moment, and able to marry anyone. Oh, to think I should have delivered you over to the cruelty of such a brute! It tears my heart to remember it.'

'Don't speak of it, mother. It is all over. And if—if—Heaven should mercifully deliver me from him altogether, I shall be so happy the past will only seem like an ugly dream to me.'

'You will not marry Mr Rushton *unless* you have proofs of Carl Bjornsën's death, Paula?' said Mrs Sutton interrogatively.

Her daughter shook her head.

'I think not. I have had to make one confession to him, and I could not face another. And Hal is sensitive on such a score. I can see that. He would always fancy that there might be a chance of my meeting Carl Bjornsën, as I met Seth Brunt. I could not tell him. I would rather break of all communication between us.'

'And be unhappy, Paula?'

'Yes. I am afraid I should be very unhappy. He has raised such a dream of bliss in my mind.

It would be terrible to have it dispelled. Fancy mother, being mistress of Highbridge Farm—that beautiful old place—with an ample income at my command, and dear Hal for my husband. Why, I should be one of the principal people in Deepdale, and all these petty tradesmen who have turned me out of my situation would be the first to bow down to me. It would be a great triumph. But I am not thinking of that. I am thinking of the blessing of having a settled home that I can ask you to, and a life spent with Hal Rushton. For, indeed, I love him as I have never loved anybody in this world before.'

Mrs Sutton, listening to these words from her daughter's lips, made a secret vow that if it were possible she would secure this happiness for her, as some sort of reparation for the terrible past. But she did not tell her so. She only stooped down and kissed her forehead as she said,—

'Well, if after due reflection, Paula, you are of the same mind, I will do my best to further your wishes, by going up to London and finding out all I can about Captain Bjornsën. But now,

my dear, you had better come to bed. You are worn out by your long journey, and will be better able to decide on your future after a night's rest.'

She led her daughter upstairs as she spoke, and into her own bedroom. A little crib stood in one corner. Paula walked up to it, and regarded its occupant in silence. A little boy of about five years old lay in it. He was not bigger than a healthy child of three, and the hands outside the quilt were thin and wasted. He had pretty, delicate features, not unlike those of his young mother, but there was a something wanting in them that made itself apparent even in sleep—the absence of the brain. The child was an imbecile. Paula gazed at him with her eyes full of tears.

'Poor little Paul!' she murmured. 'Oh, mother, how much better it would have been for him if he had died before he was born. My poor, unfortunate boy! Sometimes I feel as if I loved him with all my heart, and sometimes an unnatural feeling comes over me, as I remember *whose* son he is, and I could almost kill him for

looking so like his father. Oh, why didn't God let that cruel blow murder his body instead of only annihilating his brain?'

'Hush, my dear,' said Mrs Sutton reprovingly, 'you must not speak like that. It is a great trial for you, there is no doubt, but Paul is *your* child too. You must never forget that. And I really love the little fellow, and should miss him terribly if he were gone, though he is as troublesome as a baby of a year old, and as mischievous as a monkey. You won't take Paul from me, whatever happens, will you, my dear?' she concluded wistfully.

'Oh, no,' cried Paula, shrinking back, 'I could not take him to Deepdale, you know. It would be impossible. It would proclaim my story at once.'

'Does Mr Rushton know of his existence?'

'Yes. But not that he is an imbecile.'

'But he shall know everything before—before—'

Her mother looked at her and sighed. What would be the upshot of this new life her child desired to take upon herself? Could any fresh

and fragrant blossom grow upon a branch so blighted from the beginning? And yet how the poor darling had suffered. How cruel it would be to deny her compensation for the past. She drew her gently away from Paul's crib, and into her own bed, but long after her daughter had sunk to rest she remained anxious and wakeful, pondering in what way she could best make up to her for the fearful mistake of her married life.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL DOUBT DISPELLED.

PAULA, on the contrary, happy to be once more in her mother's arms, slept soundly, and dreamt of a possible future. All her anxieties and doubts were smoothed away, as she thought she was wandering with her lover over a range of thyme-scented hills, whilst he pointed out to her the glories of the rising sun, as typical that the shadows of her young life had passed away. Mrs Sutton heard her murmur 'dear Hal' in her sleep with a fervency she had never used towards anyone in her waking hours, and sighed to think how much her affections seemed to be involved on behalf of this unknown young man, who might, after all, refuse to fulfil the engagement

he had made with her. But Paula slept on, with a serene smile upon her face. Her hand was clasped in that of Hal Rushton; his arm was round her waist; his eyes were looking into hers. Peace and protection were her portion. She would have liked to have dreamed on so for ever. But the bright summer sun streamed into the latticed panes of the cottage window and waked her early. The first sounds that met her ear, as she languidly opened her eyes, were—'Ga, ga, bah, ow.'

'Hush, Paulie,' said Mrs Sutton softly; 'don't make a noise and wake poor mamma. Look at pretty mamma sleeping in Grannie's bed. Does Paulie love his pretty mamma?'

'Ah, ga, wow, wow,' articulated the idiot boy.

Paula closed her eyes again, with a heavy sigh. Would all her wakings be like this? To come back from dreams of ineffable bliss and affection to the consciousness that she was the mother of Carl Bjornsën's idiot child—the child whose brain and body he had blighted by his brutal violence to herself? Mrs Sutton

was dressing the little boy, interrupting her task every moment by giving him long, loving kisses, or murmuring some fond words into his ear. 'Grannie's little boy! Grannie's own dear little Paulie. Grannie's dear good little child.' These were among the loving epithets that his mother heard, and they shamed her into imitating them. After all, what had the poor infant done that he should command any feeling but one of deep compassion? She raised herself on her elbow, and turning, looked at him. There was nothing repulsive in his appearance. He was very small for his age, and attenuated to a degree, the flesh scarcely seeming to cling to the little bones, but his skin was fair as a lily, and his thin face had a plaintive expression as though he were asking Heaven what he had done to be so cruelly blighted. His large, grey eyes were vacant and soulless, and his pretty mouth was partly open. His flaxen hair was very scanty, owing to the disease in his brain. but taken altogether little Paul Bjornsën was a pathetic picture, and not an unpleasing one.

Paula's heart went out to him. He had grown so much more like herself than like his father during their year of separation.

'Paulie,' she cried eagerly, 'mamma has come home again. Don't you know me, baby?'

But all Paul did was to stare vacantly at her, with an open mouth, and utter 'Ga, ga, ow, ow.'

Paula sank back on her pillow, weeping.

'Come, come, dear child,' exclaimed her mother, 'you mustn't fret because he doesn't know you directly he sees you. A year is a long time, even for an intelligent child, in which to remember. Paulie will soon get accustomed to you. He follows me everywhere like a little dog, and really I sometimes think he understands what I say.'

'Yes, like a little dog, that is just it,' said Paula bitterly, 'and he will never be any better. My poor little son!'

'Come, dear, get up and put on your things, and when we have had breakfast, you shall take him out into the fields to gather flowers, and you will soon be the best of friends. Come,

Paul, stand up and let Grannie put on your pinafore. (See, Paula, he understands me perfectly.) And now we will go downstairs and get pretty mamma's breakfast ready against she comes down, too.'

'No, no, mother; wait a minute, and I will help you,' cried Paula, dashing into her clothes and forgetting everything but her desire to save her mother trouble.

Mrs Sutton could not afford to keep a regular servant, and a young girl who came in daily for a couple of hours was the only assistant she had in doing the work of the house. As soon as their simple breakfast was over, Paula took her little boy's hand and led him out into the fields to gather cowslips and shepherd's purse and bindweed, with which to make nosegays to adorn his grandmother's cottage. This was the only occupation he cared to follow, and young as he was the taste with which he arranged his floral treasures showed that the artist spirit would, under happier circumstances, have been strongly developed in him. His eyes seemed to take in every blossom

at a glance, so that his little basket was soon full, and he kept on giving vent to all kinds of guttural sounds of delight as he contemplated his spoils. But to Paula the walk was one long agony. The vacant stare, the listless limbs, the prematurely aged features, and the uncouth attempts to articulate, were like so many knives run into her heart every time they came under her notice, and she grew paler and paler as she contemplated the necessity of introducing this unfortunate child to the notice of Hal Rushton. She thanked Heaven that her mother loved the poor little creature and wished to retain him, for she felt she could not have asked any man to keep such a terrible witness to her former life for ever in his presence. But in this Paula wronged Hal Rushton, who had one of the tenderest hearts ever possessed by man. At last the morning stroll was ended, and Paula's watch warned her they must return. She reached home pallid and worn out. Mrs Sutton, as usual, reproached herself for her daughter's fatigue.

'I should not have let you go out to-day, she

said; 'you are still feeling the fatigue of yesterday's travelling.'

'Oh, no, mother, it is not that,' cried Paula, casting herself headlong on the sofa; 'it is the awful strain of trying to understand or make oneself understood by that poor child. I look at him, and I wonder can he be mine? Is this the baby I received with so much pride, and hoped so earnestly would make up to me in some measure for the father's want of love? Oh! it is too cruel—it is too cruel. There must have been a heavy curse, indeed, on my ill-fated marriage. Will it ever be lifted off? Can I dare to take these bitter memories into another man's home, to cast their shadows over his life and mine?'

Mrs Sutton looked at her daughter with the profoundest pity. She seemed so young, and, in the fond mother's eyes, so beautiful to be abandoned to a grief which was not of her own making. *Anything*, surely, would be justifiable that should raise her once more to her proper place amongst the youthful and the happy.

'Paula,' she said, 'you take this matter too much

to heart. Of course it is a great misfortune, but it is not an uncommon one, and you have known for the last three years that the dear child would never have his senses. You have been so little with him that you have not got accustomed to it. But try to make the best of it, my dear. He does not suffer physically, that is one great comfort, and, as far as he is able, he enjoys his little existence.'

'But by-and-by, mother, by-and-by. What is to become of him then?'

'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, my child. As long as I live, I shall be glad to look after him, and we cannot tell which of us will go first. Be content to leave it to Heaven.'

'But if he had been the same as other children, I should have been so proud of him,' sobbed Paula. 'I should never have thought of marrying again if I had had a son to love, and to love me. But this poor little creature, what comfort or pleasure can he ever be to anyone? And yet I feel so wicked not to be able to love him, and be proud of him, whatever he may be.'

'No, my dear, that would be beyond Nature; but I hope to see you yet with children round your knee, that shall atone to you for this bitter disappointment. I spoke rather coldly to you last night, I am afraid, my darling, concerning this projected marriage. You took me by surprise, and I could not at first perceive the advantages of it. But I have been thinking over it seriously since, and I shall thank God if it comes to pass. You say you love this man, and he loves you, and can raise you above all want, or necessity for work, for the remainder of your life. Well, then, the sooner it takes place the better.'

'But, mother dearest, you forget the ordeal I may have to pass through—my doubts concerning Carl Bjornsën's condition.'

'I have forgotten nothing, Paula, and whenever you think it best, or feel equal to staying alone with little Paul, I will go up to London and make all the needful inquiries for you.'

'Oh, go at once, mother, and set my mind at rest. Hal will be writing soon to hear my decision. Let me know the worst there is to know before

I receive his letter. Then I will leave him to decide the question once and for ever. And if—if—'

'If *what*, my dear?'

'If he decides against it, I will try to get a situation in France or America, somewhere far away, where I shall never hear the sound of his dear name to wrench my heartstrings anew.'

'And you would leave *me*, Paula, and your poor little child?' said Mrs Sutton reproachfully.

'Oh, mother, what could I do? My heart is wrapt up in Hal Rushton. I think I must have loved him from the first day we met. My affection seems the growth of years. I know that if I lose him I shall still have the duties of life to perform, but I must put the sea between us, until I have forgotten the bright dream of happiness which his love has opened up to me.'

'Paula,' replied Mrs Sutton, 'I shall go to London to-morrow, and set your mind at rest as soon as possible. You are feverish and ill, dear child, and this suspense may do you harm. I have the address of Captain Bjornsën's landlady, and if he is not with her still, she will

certainly know where to find him, if he is still to be found. But I may be absent for three or four days. Do you feel equal to taking charge of Paulie for that time?'

'Oh, mother, my own child! Of course I can.'

'You will promise me, then, not to cry over him, which will only frighten the poor little boy, without doing him any good. Treat him as you would a baby, and he will respond in his own fashion. And I shall come back with good news for you, my darling, rest assured of that. God does not permit his children to be tortured for ever. He will have made a way for you to begin a new life which shall recompense you for the past.'

'It will, it will!' exclaimed Paula, 'if I am only fortunate enough to enter on it. I daresay you think I am foolish about the matter, mother, but when you see Hal you will understand me better. And he will be a son to you — I am sure he will. He has often called me a lucky girl to have a mother. His mother died many years ago, and his father married again, which

made him very unhappy; but he will never remember that,' said Paula, with a smile, 'when we are married.'

Her hopeful smiles had still more effect upon her mother than her tears. She could not bear to contemplate their being quenched in disappointment. So she made all her preparations to start for London the next day. Paula had proposed, very naturally, that they should write first and see what tidings they could obtain of Captain Bjornsën through the post, but Mrs Sutton had her own purpose for instituting the inquiries in person. Then came the question of expenses. The mother's small income was quite incapable of stretching to cover a journey from Devonshire to London, and, perhaps, a stay of two or three days in the latter place; yet it was not until Paula threatened to go instead of her that she consented to use some of her daughter's savings for the purpose. At last she was off, and Paula was left alone with her little son. Mrs Sutton did not let the grass grow under her feet. Though she reached London late in the

afternoon, as soon as ever she had secured a bedroom for her use in Paddington she set off to visit the last address from which Carl Bjornsën had written to her. It was not far from her own lodging, in a dirty little street leading out of the Edgware Road. What a come down for the man who had married her daughter, who had been a successful trader, and the master of his own vessel, but who had sunk and sunk—pressed down by the heavy weight of inebriety—until his own place and his own people knew him no more. Mrs Sutton knocked timidly at the door, fearing that the drunken wretch himself might encounter her when it was opened. But the only person that appeared was a tattered landlady, who, with the words 'No rooms vacant here,' was about to shut the door in her face.

'Pardon me,' said Mrs Sutton, 'but can I see the owner of the house?'

'I am the lady that owns the house. What do you want with me?' was the reply.

'Does a Captain Bjornsën live here?'

'*Captain Bjornsën?*' echoed the woman scorn-

fully; 'a pretty captain! No, he don't, and a good job, too.'

'Can you tell me were he has gone?'

'Yes, I can tell you—to a place a deal too good for him. He's gone to the work'us, is Captain Bjornsën, unless he's gone to hell, which is the likeliest of the two, by this time. But I can't stand talking about sich riff-raff any longer,' and again she was about to retreat.

'One moment,' pleaded Mrs Sutton, producing a half-sovereign, 'I have the misfortune to be connected with this person, and am anxious to ascertain the truth concerning him. Can you spare me half-an-hour? I am willing to pay for it,' and she held out the money as she spoke.

The landlady softened. She held the door open for her visitor to pass through, and ushered her into a meagre, grimy sitting-room on the same floor.

'Well, ma'am,' she ejaculated, as she pocketed the half-sovereign and rolled her blackened hands round in her blacker apron, 'of course when a lady *is* a lady I'm ready to treat with her as sich, but

I'm sorry I can't say no good of the Captain. He owes me a power of money, which is cruel on a widder, and he lay here day after day drunk as an 'og, till I could stand it no longer, so I gave notice to the parish authorities, and they came and took him off to the infirmary. But I reckon he ain't there now.'

'Why should you think so?'

'Because there was nothink of him left ma'am. He had drunk hisself to that beastly condition, he was at death's door. I'm sure the officers as come for him they had a nice work to get him away. He couldn't stand. He was crumpled up like an old sack. They said as they didn't believe he'd last till they got him to the house. But *I* didn't pity him. A nasty beast as brought it all on hisself, a-swilling and a-swilling from morning till night. And I 'ope you're not set on seeing 'im again, ma'am, for he's gone—you may make up your mind to that—as sure as eggs is eggs.'

'But do you feel *quite* sure?' said Mrs Sutton eagerly. 'Might he not have recovered?'

'*Recovered!*' cried the landlady shrilly. 'You ask any of my lodgers, ma'am, if he could have recovered. Why, 'e was a mass of corruption. 'Twas enough to ruin my house to keep 'im here. And there would have been a corpus in it if he'd stayed over the night. I never was so thankful as when I see the last of him, though he owed me a matter of over five pound, which I don't suppose I shall ever see again, unless you, being a real lady, would feel like paying 'is debt, seeing he was a relation of your'n.'

'No, no, my good woman, he was not a relation of mine, thank God, although I had the misfortune to be connected with him. I would pay you what is due and welcome, and it is very hard you should be defrauded of it, but I am poor myself, and have not the money. All I came here to ascertain was if Captain Bjornsën was alive or dead.'

'Oh, he's dead enough—you can make up your mind to that, ma'am—and a good riddance, I should think, for his family. He didn't live through *that* night, I'll take my oath of it. He

had the rattle in his throat as they drove away from the door.'

'And which infirmary did they take him to?'

'The Paddington work'us, ma'am, and I wish I'd sent him there weeks afore. But I always had too good a 'art for business. And now, is there anythink else as you may want to know?'

'Nothing, nothing, thanks. I will detain you no longer,' said Mrs Sutton, rising to take her leave.

'And if ever,' added the landlady, as she let her out at the door, 'any of 'is relatives, ma'am, feel like discharging of his just doos, I 'ope you won't forget my name and address, for though I detained his box, there wasn't nothink in it, but a few empty bottles and a pair of corduroys as wouldn't fetch more than ninepence.'

'I will not forget, rest assured of that,' said Mrs Sutton as she hurried from the door.

As she walked back to the room she had secured for herself her heart beat rapidly. Her girl was free, then — morally and legally free. This tormentor of her innocence and destroyer

of her youth was gone to render up his account before high Heaven of the dastardly way in which he had used her. There was no doubt of the truth of the landlady's story. She had given it too naturally, and it coincided exactly with that which Seth Brunt had told Paula. Carl Bjornsën's vices had at last revenged themselves upon him, and not only brought him down to death's door, but hustled him through it. Mrs Sutton was perfectly aware what she ought to do next. She should have called on the workhouse officials to receive a corroboration of the landlady's story, and a proper certificate of Captain Bjornsën's death. She pondered over it that night, but by the morning she had changed her mind, and decided with herself that it was unnecessary, and her best plan was to go straight back to Paula. The fact is, she was afraid. Suppose she were to hear that their surmises were incorrect, that the man had recovered, or was likely to do so, and that by instituting inquiries after him she might in some way make herself responsible to the parish for taking him off their hands. It would be too

terrible. No, she was sure her best plan of action was to take it for granted that what she had heard was true, and Carl Bjornsën was gone for ever. And it could make no real difference since Paula had been legally separated from him for the last three years, and was free to marry whom she chose. Her poor girl! How greatly she had suffered through her mother's want of prudence. How glad she would be to go home and tell her that she might be happy again.

Meanwhile Paula, left alone with the little imbecile, was trying hard to school herself to encounter a disappointment. She had never been lucky, she said, with a secret sigh as she sat with Paulie in a flower-besprinkled meadow, so why should she expect to be so now. Her former husband and she were separated for ever. He could never exert any influence over her again, and she was legally free to do as she chose, she knew all that well. But she also knew Hal Rushton's sensitive nature, and felt that the existence of Carl Bjornsën would be a tremendous stumbling-block in the way of their

marriage. And was not Carl as strong as an ox? Had he not drunk himself down to the edge of the grave many a time before, and risen up again, bloated and blear-eyed, but with his iron constitution still as good as that of most men? She would not dare to dream that so great a deliverance could be in store for her. And in that case, what remained for her to do? Had she the courage to seek for another situation, humble and uninteresting as the last, and settle down again amongst strangers, to eat her heart out with grief in silence? She shrunk from the idea with loathing. She would so much rather cross the ocean, to America or Australia, and in beginning a new life try to forget that the old life had ever been. Why should not her mother and Paulie come with her? There was not much to chain them to their native land, and everything to make them wish for a freer and less cramped existence. This poor atom of humanity, who could never take his place amongst his fellow-men at home, might perhaps find his mind expand with his muscles in a fresher and less worn-out soil. And there the hateful

name of Bjornsën would never arise to evoke the bitter memories of the past, and no other who had known him would torture her as Seth Brunt had done. And Paula thought thus, until England seemed to recede in the background and Australia stand out boldly on the landscape like a Land of Promise. She did not expect Mrs Sutton home for at least three days, and was astonished, as she was sitting with her child in the fields, on a throne of buttercups, on the evening of the second day, to see her coming slowly to meet them. Paula jumped up in a minute, much disconcerting the little boy, who was weaving buttercup chains on her lap, and ran to meet her mother.

'Don't tell me!' she cried, as she came within earshot. 'I have guessed your news, dear mother, and am sorry you should have had your trouble for nothing; but we can't dispose events to suit our own convenience. Why did you walk out to meet us here? You will be so tired. But come home now, and I will get your tea.'

'Paula, my dear, what has come to you?' exclaimed Mrs Sutton, as she gazed in her face, with

its feverish cheeks and sparkling eyes. 'You are jumping at a conclusion with a vengeance. I don't know what you are thinking of, but I have some very serious news for you. Seth Brunt's story was true, my dear, and Carl Bjornsën will never trouble you again. God has taken your cause into His own hands.'

Paula turned suddenly pale. The revulsion of feeling was too much for her. She had met her mother close to a stile, and she caught at it with both her hands, and trembled.

'What do you mean?' she whispered.

'My dear, what *can* I mean, except that it is as we anticipated, and your husband is dead. He has drunk himself to death at last.'

'Where did he die, mother?'

'In the workhouse. His landlady told me he had reduced himself to such a disgusting condition by drinking that she could stand it no longer, and as he had not paid her for some time, she sent him to the workhouse, and he died there the same night. She said he had the death rattle in his throat as they drove away.'

'Carl *dead*—dead in the workhouse,' said Paula slowly, as tears of pity gathered in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. It was inconsistent, but it was womanly. As long as she believed him to be alive, and ready to wreak vengeance on herself for having got the better of him, she felt hard and unforgiving. But now that she heard that he was dead, and could never worry her again, her thoughts flew back to the time when they had been better friends than at present, and her heart compassionated his miserable end. But her mother became impatient of her inconsistency.

'Yes, dead in the workhouse, and it was a fitting end, I venture to say, for such a life.'

'When did it happen, mother?'

'One day last week. About the same time, I fancy, as you saw Seth Brunt. It is curious their being carried off so close together. Now, Paula, you don't mean to tell me you are going to cry for the loss of a man who has been your greatest enemy—who has kicked you, and abused you, and insulted you? This is too ridiculous. You should go down on your knees instead, and thank God

for having answered your daily prayer, "Deliver us from evil."'

'Yes, mother, I know it, and I *shall* be thankful by-and-by—when I have had time to realise it. But just for the moment it seems so sudden and so shocking. Poor Carl dead—dying without friends, or comforts, or hope. Shovelled away into a pauper's grave, without a soul to shed one tear that he is gone. Mayn't I cry—just a very little—over such a wasted, wicked life? Think how different he might have been. How different he *was* when we first knew him. Don't you remember the Slaters bringing him over to the cottage? How young and fresh and pleasant he appeared. You said you thought his Swedish accent was so musical.'

'Oh, Paula, don't remind me of that time when I was foolish enough to be persuaded by a prepossessing exterior and a soft tongue into trusting the happiness of my only child to such a man. I don't want to remember such things. His subsequent behaviour blotted them all out. I can think only of your sufferings, and I repeat, thank God

that he is gone, and if you don't say the same, you are very ungrateful.'

'I know it is best that he is gone,' replied Paula softly, 'for he never would have been any better. He had lost everything in life, poor fellow, through his drinking, and he would have gone on from bad to worse. I told Brunt there could be no other end to it, that he was past all reformation. But, mother, we were friendly once, if nothing more. There was a time when Carl thought he loved me, and showed it after his fashion. And death is always sad and solemn. Don't think me weaker than you need.'

'I couldn't think you weaker than I do,' said Mrs Sutton bluntly. 'To talk like that about a craven wretch, who thought nothing of kicking you, is sham sentimentality, in my opinion. If you have any motherly feeling in your bosom, Paula, you have only to look at your poor child to make you see the folly of lamenting the loss of a man like that. Remember Paul, ruined in mind and body by the brutality of the father who should have been his best protector. Bah! you ought to

be ashamed of yourself. Please don't let me see any more of your tears. They make me angry with you.'

Paula blazed up under the maternal reproach.

'Mother, I do *not* lament his loss. It is no loss. It is a blessing. And I have not forgotten Paul, nor the cowardly blows that made him what he is. Only, it seems sad for *anyone* to be shut away from God's sunshine and God's earth, whilst the world goes laughing and singing on its way—and doubly sad when no one is left here to regret it.'

'That's all very pretty talking, my dear, but the good and the young and the loveable are shut away in like manner with those who have made themselves odious whilst here below. But the fact is, you are over-excited, and don't know what you are talking about. Suppose I were to confess—since you display so much feeling in the matter—that I have only told you this little fable to see how you would bear it, and that Carl Bjornsën, instead of sleeping in a pauper's grave, is alive and fairly well, and

likely to trouble and haunt you for many years to come. What then?'

Paula caught her breath quickly.

'You would not—you *could* not have been so cruel, mother,' she gasped.

'No, my dear; but your dismay at the mere doubt should teach you what your real feelings are. Come, now. Let us go home, and indulge in no more hysterics. Where's that blessed child? Still with his nose amongst the buttercups. He'd stay there all night, as quiet as a mouse, if we'd let him. Come here, my darling. When I want to weep, I'll weep over your blighted life, and not over the death of the dastard who blighted it. Come to your grannie, boy. She loves you too well to lament over your father.'

'I do *not* lament over him,' exclaimed Paula almost fiercely. 'Give me my child, mother. You shall not teach him that you are the only one who loves him. *I* love him, too, and if I have ever harboured a rebellious thought concerning him, may God forgive me, but it has been only because—because—'

'Because he is his father's son. Exactly so. But from this day, my daughter, let us make a compact to forget it. From this day, let the name of Carl Bjornsën be a forbidden sound between us. He is dead. Let his memory die with him.'

'Yes, dear, I should wish it so. It is what I have been striving to do for years past. As far as we can, we will.'

'That is a promise,' said her mother, as she turned and kissed her.

And then, holding Paulie between them, the two women walked over the hills to their cottage home.

CHAPTER X.

A SOLEMN PROMISE.

ALTHOUGH Paula remained rather thoughtful and pensive during the next few days, she soon recovered her serenity, and began to look forward, in secret, to the moment when she should see Hal Rushton again. One morning, about a week after her mother's visit to London, she encountered her at the breakfast table, blushing and smiling.

'I have received a letter from Mr Rushton,' she said.

'Indeed, and what is his news?'

'He is very anxious to hear my decision, and to know if he may follow me to Grassdene and make the acquaintance of my mother.'

'And how do you intend to answer him?'

Paula's face fell.

'I don't know how I shall answer him. After what has passed between us, I ought not to keep him in suspense, for I told him I was coming home to ask your advice in the matter. Yet it seems so horribly, indecently soon to be thinking of love and marriage.'

'Too soon after Bjornsën's death, you mean.'

'Of course.'

'But that man was dead to you three years ago, Paula—dead, legally and morally. You have not seen him for that space of time. You know that I am not at all anxious to see you marry again. I distrust men and their powers of constancy too much. Still, if you have set your mind on this, and it is to be, it would be ridiculous to let any false sentiment about that dead drunkard stand in your way. I thought we had agreed to drop the mention of his name.'

'Yes, yes! And you think I owe it to Mr Rushton, then, not to keep him waiting for an answer?'

'If you intend to marry him, I do. Men won't stand much opposition in their courtships, and by your own account you have given him one shock

already by the confession that you were not a single woman. But pray make up your mind about it first.'

Paula coloured.

'I *have* made up my mind, mother. I told you what I felt and thought about it the other day. But ought I to give him permission to come to Grassdene (which will be tantamount to accepting his offer of marriage) without telling him everything—the awful circumstances that led to Paul's affliction, and the separation that followed it?'

Mrs Sutton thought a moment, and then said,—

'I don't think you should *marry* Mr Rushton without telling him the truth; but it will be better to let him hear it from *me*. It is a painful subject for you to enlarge upon, and you would try to soften it down, for the sake of the dead. But I shall have no such scruple. I can tell Mr Rushton the whole matter, and it will come better from my lips than yours. My advice to you, my dear, is to write to the young man and say that we both consider that before he finally makes up his mind it is necessary he should learn more about your family,

and yourself than he knows at present, and that if he likes to come to Grassdene on that understanding, we shall be pleased to see him here.'

'He is sure to come,' replied Paula, smiling.

'I daresay he will, and I will receive him on his arrival, and tell him your whole story, and then he will be unable to say afterwards that he has been deceived.'

Accordingly, Paula took her mother's counsel, and wrote to Hal Rushton. Her letter was rather timidly expressed, and showed an amount of reserve which made her lover unhappy until he had realised that it also extended a permission for him to follow her to Devon. He answered by return of post that he should travel down without delay, and they might expect to see him in two days' time. When the morning of his arrival dawned, Paula walked over the hills to the house of a neighbour, with the intention of remaining there till sunset. Her heart throbbed with fear when she thought of the ordeal Hal had to pass through during her absence. She had great faith in his affection for herself, but

she had seen something of his pride, and she dreaded a repetition of the scene which took place when he heard that she had been married. So she spent a day full of anxiety and suspense, one moment believing that the happiest era of her life had arrived, and the next that all hope of happiness was over. Meanwhile Mrs Sutton was prepared to receive this second suitor for her daughter's hand. She had made a terrible mistake about the first, and she was determined to sift the character and feelings of this one down to the bottom. She was almost glad she had so disagreeable a story to tell him. It would be a good test of his sincerity. She looked a perfect old gentlewoman as she sat in state in the little parlour to receive her visitor. Her best dress, which was only a black alpaca, sat on her slim figure with as much grace as if she had been a duchess clad in velvet. Her features, which were much like Paula's, still retained traces of beauty, and her soft grey hair was modestly disposed beneath her black lace cap. She had dispatched Paulie to a field behind the cottage until he

should be required, and retained the services of her little handmaiden for the afternoon. So that when Hal Rushton, dressed in a knickerbocker suit of tweed, with his handsome face flushed with expectation, and a flower in his buttonhole, arrived, he was ushered into his future mother-in-law's presence in proper style. Mrs Sutton rose to receive him with an extended hand.

'Mr Rushton, I presume?' she commenced. 'You are very punctual, sir.'

'Am I?' stammered Hal. 'I am staying at an inn about a mile distant, and I did not know exactly how much time it would take me to walk over. Miss—Miss Stafford is well, I hope.'

'My daughter is quite well, thank you. She has walked over to a neighbour's house. She preferred I should see you first by myself. You have no objection, I trust, to my being in Paula's confidence in this important matter?'

'Oh, madam, no!' exclaimed the young man drawing nearer to her. 'How could I love and esteem a woman who did *not* confide in her mother? I have had the great misfortune to

lose my own mother, and Paula's love for and faith in you have been amongst her greatest attractions for me.'

Mrs Sutton was gratified both by his voice and way of speaking of her daughter. She ventured to examine him fully. He was certainly a very fine young man, and with a prepossessing charm about him that was better than beauty. She no longer wondered that Paula's heart had been taken by storm. If his qualities of mind only equalled those of his person, what a happy woman she would be.

'Paula has always been a good daughter,' she answered softly. 'I married late in life, Mr Rushton, and she is my only child. You will think I ought to have guarded her like a treasure. So I tried to do, but I was very unfortunate. My husband, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, died, leaving us only a miserable pittance, in the shape of a pension, to subsist upon, and had I followed him, my child would have had neither money nor friends, so that I thought a suitable marriage would be the

happiest thing for her. A man of the name of Carl Bjornsën, a Swedish trader, offered her his hand, and I was blind enough to second his wishes, and help to wreck my poor child's life.'

Her voice faltered, and Hal Rushton sympathetically placed his hand upon hers.

'My dear Mrs Sutton, do not unnerve yourself by relating the sad story to me. Paula—I mean Miss Stafford (you will pardon me for calling her by her assumed name)—has told me about her unfortunate marriage. Pray believe that I have reconciled myself to the idea, and it will make no further difference to me.'

'Thank you for saying so, Mr Rushton; but I had rather you waited until you had heard the whole. There is more to tell, and my daughter desired I should tell it to you before you met her again. She too is good, too forgiving. I am certain she never told you half of what she suffered from the wickedness of that man. Can you conceive my child, who had been so tenderly brought up—all the more so, perhaps, because we were so poor that from her infancy

I waited on her myself—subjected to all sorts of tyranny from a drunkard's whim—beaten, kicked, bruised, insulted, pulled from her berth on board ship at dead of night, and dragged up on deck before the common seamen in her night clothes, and there felled to the ground, in the sight of them all, by a blow from his cowardly hand.'

Hal Rushton rose from his seat with a face on fire and a clenched fist.

'*The brute!*' he exclaimed. 'I wish he were living instead of dead, that I might treat him as he treated her.'

'Ah, don't say that,' cried Mrs Sutton, shuddering; 'what would my poor girl do then? But there is an aggravation of the horror. This assault upon a most inoffensive woman was committed at a time when men, who deserve the name, are more than usually tender to their wives. My poor Paula was expecting to become a mother, and so she shortly did—of an idiot child, whose brain was destroyed and body injured by his own father's violence.'

'Is this the child she has spoken to me about?' asked Hal, who was still visibly agitated.

'Yes. She has but one—a boy of five years old. She was only twenty when she returned to me, poor darling, covered with bruises from head to foot, and with hardly enough life left in her to crawl home. We thought then that the man would have had too much shame to reclaim a wife he had treated so cruelly, but some men have no shame. A year after the child's birth he summarily ordered Paula to return to her duty. I refused to let her go, and when he insisted, I went to law about it, and other grave charges being proved against Carl Bjornsën, a divorce was pronounced between them.'

'*A divorce!*' echoed Hal Rushton, starting. 'Do you mean to say she is not a widow—that she is only divorced from him?'

'No, no; pray don't disquiet yourself. Paula *is* a widow. The man has died since. But a divorce was the only means by which I could save her from further violence. He had destroyed the child. He would have killed her

next. You can have no idea what a brute he was.'

'Is the child here?' asked Rushton shortly

'Yes; he lives with me, and he always will do so, I hope, for I am very fond of him, notwithstanding that he is his father's son. And Paula wishes that you should see him, and then you will know the worst,' said Mrs Sutton.

She rose as she spoke, and opening the parlour door, called to her little handmaid, 'Lizzy, go and fetch Master Paulie; he is playing in the field at the back,' and in a few minutes the girl returned with the little boy. His grandmother raised him in her arms, and seated him on the table. He looked full into Hal's face with his large grey expressionless eyes, and then he opened his mouth and said 'Ow, ba, ba, wow,' and smiled in an imbecile manner.

'My poor darling,' cried Mrs Sutton, kissing the child, to hide what she thought would disgust the young man. But she did not know Hal Rushton. His lip quivered as he gazed at the pitiable sight and thought that this was Paula's child—Paula, whose brain was so bright and intelligent, who

was so much better instructed and informed than himself. He touched the boy's head softly with his fingers, and murmured,—

'Poor little chappie! Someone has had to answer very heavily, it is to be hoped, for this.'

'I agree with you, sir,' said Mrs Sutton. 'I have no pity or compassion mingled with my memories of that man, and think no punishment could be too hard for him. My poor girl's life has had a bitter and shameful beginning. The question is if she will have the courage to court a renewal of such misery.'

'Oh, do not speak like that, madam,' exclaimed Hal Rushton eagerly; 'do not harden yourself against my suit because Paula has been subjected to such brutal treatment. Believe me, it will be the object of my life to make her forget it. I love her, Mrs Sutton, deeply and devotedly, and I flatter myself that she is fond of me. Pray do not put any obstacle in the way of our marriage. It was torture to me to see her working like a slave to earn her living, to know she was under the bondage of people inferior to her by birth and

education—*she* who, I could see from the beginning of our acquaintance, was made for higher and better things. I don't mean to say,' went on the young man, hurriedly, 'that I can give her half what she deserves or ought to have, but I have a comfortable home and an income large enough to place her for ever above the need of working for herself. Won't you trust her to me? Won't you try and believe that *all* men are not like her first husband, that *some* care for their wives more than for themselves, and that *I* am amongst the number?'

'My dear Mr Rushton, I shall have nothing to do with it. Paula is her own mistress, and if I am not mistaken she has already decided in your favour. It is *you* whom she feared would draw back when you heard the whole of her sad history. If it does not affect you, she will be only too glad, I should imagine, to forget it.'

'I will *make* her forget it,' exclaimed Hal fervently. 'We will make the past a sealed book, into which it shall be a penalty to look. She is still

young enough, thank God, to begin a new life with me.'

'You are right Mr Rushton, said Mrs Sutton, 'and it is your best chance of happiness. Make a compact with Paula never to speak together of the past. She is too tender-hearted, dear child, and too morbidly inclined. She forgets the injury she has sustained, in the dread lest any failure of duty on her own part led to the catastrophe. I have done my utmost to make her view Bjornsën's conduct in its true light, and to regard his memory with the execration it deserves. But she is too good to hate him as I do. It is a fault on the right side, but it may be carried too far. Do make it a condition of your marriage that the past is never spoken of, or even alluded to.'

'I am afraid I should find it a difficult task to make anything a *condition* of our marriage,' replied the young man gaily, 'but I will certainly make Paula promise me to forget, as far as possible, all that has gone before it. And now, dear Mrs Sutton, when shall I see her? I have heard all you have to tell me, and it makes no

difference to me. May I not tell Paula so myself?'

'Certainly, Mr Rushton, if you choose to go in search of her. I will show you the direction in which she has gone.'

She caught up the little boy in her arms as she spoke, and carried him to the front door. The sun was setting over the hills, and dyeing them golden in his waning light. She stretched her hand to the left, which led by a picturesque country lane to some pasture lands.

'Paula has walked down that lane, and over those fields, to the house of a neighbouring farmer. She promised to return at sunset, and if you walk that way you are sure to meet her. And when you have had your say, you can bring her back to tea, Mr Rushton.'

'Yes, *when*,' he said, laughing; 'but don't wait for us *too* long, Mrs Sutton,' and with that he waved his stick and walked rapidly away.

'He's very different from the other,' thought Mrs Sutton, as he disappeared. 'Ah, well! I hope my poor darling has chosen wisely this time. *Two*

such men as Bjornsën cannot possibly exist in the world.'

Meanwhile Hal was passing through the little lane, fringed with wild roses and nut bushes, with a heart bounding with excitement, whilst he looked eagerly around for some signs of Paula. He met her in the third field he traversed. She was walking very slowly, also looking from side to side, as though she dreaded yet hoped to see him. Hal Rushton did not keep her long in suspense. As soon as he caught sight of her, he commenced to run, and came up to her with a beaming face and outstretched hands.

'Paula,' he exclaimed, 'your mother has told me everything. There is nothing more for me to learn. Are you mine now, or are you not?'

'Are you quite sure that you wish me to be yours?' she answered shyly.

'Sure as I am that I hope for Heaven. Come, my dearest, you have no further excuse. The terrible secret, that you were compelled in self-defence to divorce the man who was not worthy to be your husband, is out. I have seen your poor little

child, too, and I have shuddered at the account of the terrible indignities you have undergone. They make no difference to me, dear, except to excite the deepest compassion and sympathy for you, and to raise an ardent longing that I may help you to forget them. Will you give me leave to try, Paula? Will you be my darling wife, and forget you ever bore that name to any other man?'

'Oh, Hal, I will—gladly and gratefully—if you consent to forget it, too. I know I am not good enough for you—that—'

'Hush!' he said, gently interrupting her. 'I will not listen to anything of that sort. You are the one woman I would choose out of all the world, Paula, and I cannot be sufficiently thankful that I have gained you.'

He wound his strong arms about her as he spoke, and kissed her reverently on the lips, and Paula, feeling the protecting clasp and the tender salute, closed her eyes with rapture, and believed that all her troubles were at an end.

'And now, love,' said Hal, when they were both a little calmer, 'I want you to seal our

betrothal with a promise. Ours must not be a long engagement, Paula. I want you home at Highbridge Farm as soon as ever you can come. But let us begin our married life under a solemn compact to let all that has gone before it sink into oblivion. You have been very unhappy, my poor darling, and very shamefully treated, but that is all over now. The man is dead and gone. Let him and his sins be forgotten. Will you promise me faithfully, Paula, never to mention Carl Bjornsën's name or the subject of your former marriage to me. Let me think I am your first husband? I shall soon believe it if I am not reminded to the contrary. So I want that to be a settled thing between us. Will you promise?'

'Gladly, dear Hal.'

'Then say so, sweetheart.'

'I promise solemnly that from this time henceforward I will never speak of my past life, or, if possible, think of it. Will that do, Hal?'

'Beautifully, dear. And I am sure it will be best. Speaking of an injury only aggravates the sense of it, and keeps the wound raw. And I

hope to make you so happy, my Paula. I mean to be so tender with my treasure, so anxious to make up to her for such a sorry beginning. When may I commence, darling? When are you coming home to Deepdale as my wife?'

'Oh, Hal, we must ask mother. I must tell you that she was very much against our marriage when I first told her about you. She is so much afraid for me, poor mother. But I hope you may have converted her. How did you get on together?'

'Very well; and I like her exceedingly. She must come and live with us at Deepdale. She will like the pretty old valley. It is almost as romantic in appearance as Devon. And I would not separate her from you for all the world. Do you think she will consent to it?'

Paula's face lengthened.

'Oh, Hal dear, how could she? You forget poor Paulie.'

His face also grew grave. The mention of the child brought back everything.

'Ah, to be sure! But have you never thought

of placing the poor little creature in an asylum, Paula? He would be happier there than at home.'

'Do you think so? I am afraid mother would not consent to it. She is very fond of him, and I, too—I—wouldn't like to think of him amongst strangers. He is so very meek and quiet. He would suffer without a complaint.'

'Oh, he mustn't suffer; of course not,' rejoined the lover quickly. 'I thought he would be better off with other children. However, that is a matter for future consideration. The present concerns only our two happy selves. This is August. You will come home by the first of September, won't you? You wouldn't be so cruel as to deprive me of my partridge shooting?'

Paula smiled.

'What will Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy say?

'Not to mention Mrs Snaley! Well, they must say what they like. And the Snaleys must turn out, and pretty sharp, too, or I shall have no time to have the old place brushed up before my bride comes home.'

'Are the Snaleys to leave Highbridge Farm?' asked Paula, starting.

'Rather. You don't suppose I am going to subject you to sit down in the same room as that woman and her son! I value you a little too much for that, Paula. To tell the truth, dear, I have been culpably negligent in the matter. They ought to have gone long ago, when my father died. But I was young at the time, and had not been used to manage for myself, and Mrs Snaley understood all about the servants and the farm. So that it was a convenience to me at first, but since then it has degenerated into a nuisance, and I have often been on the point of making a change, only I was too lazy. But now I am going to reform all round, and my first duty will be to clear Highbridge Farm, in readiness for my darling. Yes, Mrs Snaley and Ted must go. There is no doubt of that. She has a little income of her own, you know, quite sufficient for her need (her first husband was only a herdsman), and I shall give her a cottage on the estate rent free. And then I must try and beautify the farm for you.'

'You cannot do all that in a month, Hal,' replied Paula, as they walked homewards, with his arm tightly clasped round her waist and her head resting on his shoulder.

'Oh, yes, I can. You don't know how expeditious I shall manage to be when it is for *you*. And so it is to be the end of August,' he said fondly.

'I didn't say so, Hal.'

'But you mean it, though. We have both been lonely too long, and now that the cup of happiness is raised to our lips, why should we delay to drink it. Say it shall be as I wish?'

'It shall be as you wish, Hal.'

'Oh, my White Rose, I cannot tell you how I have dreamed of seeing you walk into the old homestead as its mistress. I always think of you as a white rose, Paula. You are so like those soft creamy blossoms that grow about my parlour windows. How shall I feel when you are established there for ever? But you mustn't make me too soft, darling. You must let me go out hunting and shooting and fishing still,

or the neighbours will say Hal Rushton has turned into a milksop.'

'Ah, those neighbours,' responded Paula, with a slight quiver, 'shall you tell them anything about me Hal, or leave them to think what they choose?'

'I shall tell them nothing. It is not their business,' replied the young man firmly. 'They believe you to have been Miss Stafford. Let them continue to think so. I will set none of their tongues wagging about my wife.'

'Paulie?' faltered his companion.

'Can't we say—if needful—that Paulie is your cousin, or nephew, or an adopted child of Mrs Sutton's? I see no harm in the subterfuge, and it will save you unpleasantness. It is not, you see, my darling,' said Hal tenderly, 'as if the poor little chap were all right, when it would grieve you to disown him. But *he* will be none the worse, and you will be all the better for not acknowledging his parentage.'

'You are right,' replied Paula, 'and I am sure mother will say so, too. She is as anxious that I should ignore the past as you can be.'

'I am afraid she must be more anxious about her tea than anything else at this moment,' said Hal, laughing. 'She made me promise to take you back to it as soon as we had had our "say." Well, I think we have had it, sweetheart. I think that, however long we may live, we shall never improve upon those words, "I love you, and I will marry you."'

'No, *never*,' acquiesced Paula fervently.

'Then let us go home and tell the mother so, and let her participate in her children's joy. Oh, Paula, Paula, to think that you are mine for ever.'

'To think that I shall never spend my evenings in that lonely schoolhouse again, nor have to repeat the same thing fifty times over to those abominable children. Hal, I am *too* happy. Is it not too good to last?'

'It will last our lifetimes, dearest. I shall return home after my long day's hunting or shooting to encounter not the distasteful form of Mrs Snaley, or her ugly little Ted, but my beautiful White Rose, waiting for me to come and stretch my weary limbs at her dear feet.'

'And the day will seem so short to me when I know for certain that you and the evening will arrive together. How I used to long, Hal, that you would come to see me. I have sat at my window for hours sometimes, in hopes you might pass by.'

'Whilst *I* was afraid to go near the school-house lest you should think me impertinent or presuming. Thank goodness, those days are past, my darling, and we may indulge our mutual love to its utmost extent.'

These words brought them back to the cottage, where Mrs Sutton, having dispatched Paulie to his bed, was waiting for them to join her at tea. Of course she read at the first glance that matters were settled between them, and before they parted that evening it was arranged that Hal Rushton was only to remain one more day in Grassdene before he returned to Deepdale to make his intentions formally known to his friends, and prepare Highbridge Farm to receive his wife the first week in September.

CHAPTER XI.

HAL BREAKS THE NEWS TO DEEPDALE.

THE vicar and his wife were sitting quietly together one afternoon when they saw Hal Rushton walking up the carriage drive.

'Here comes Mr Rushton,' exclaimed Mrs Measures, 'and how bright and happy he looks. Very different from his usual appearance lately. I wonder if he has had any good news?'

'I fancy the best news he could hear would be that someone intended to take his stepmother off his hands,' replied the vicar. 'What a life the poor boy must lead with her. He has been for a little holiday somewhere this week, and she rails about it as if he had committed a crime.'

'Why does he keep the old woman at High-

bridge Farm?' said his wife. 'It is not his duty. I shall ask him the question plump.'

'Ah, my dear, be careful how you lower his sense of obligation. Some day he will marry, and then of necessity the Snaleys must go. But here he is. How are you, Hal? We were just talking about you.'

'Indeed, sir,' replied Hal, colouring as he shook hands with them both.

'We hear you have been away on a holiday, and we hope you enjoyed it. Where did you go?'

'That is what I have come over to tell you and Mrs Measures, sir. You have always been so kind to me since my father's death that I feel as if it were only due that you should be the first to hear my news.'

'So you *have* some news for us, Hal.'

'Yes, Mr Measures. I have been down to Devon to settle a certain matter. I am going to be married, sir.'

Mrs Measures gave a little start and exclaimed, 'Oh!' but her husband laid his hand upon her arm to prevent her saying more.

'Go on, Hal, tell us all about it.'

'I daresay you've guessed it, sir,' replied the young man, looking as foolish as most men do under such circumstances. 'It's Miss Stafford. I've been down to see her and her mother. We've been fond of each other for some time past, and if I had had my way she should never have left Deepdale. But she was too proud to stay here under the circumstances, and perhaps it is as well she went home first and accepted my proposals under her mother's roof.'

'*Much* best,' said Mrs Measures, as she shook his hand again; 'and oh, Mr Rushton, I am so glad to hear of it. She is such a nice girl. I like her so much, and she will make you so happy. And your marriage will stop all the suspicions and unkind things that the village may have said about her.'

'As for that,' returned Hal proudly, 'I should like to see the man or woman who will dare to speak against *my wife*. Of course, Miss Stafford has told me everything. We have no secrets from each other, and I am perfectly satisfied that

she acted in all things whilst here as I should have wished her to have done. For the rest, I care nothing.'

'Certainly not. You are quite right,' acquiesced the vicar, 'and henceforward it will concern no one but your two selves. It will be a great rise for Miss Stafford, Hal. To jump from being the village school teacher to become your wife, and the mistress of Highbridge Farm. She will hold (after Mrs Measures) the highest position in Deepdale.'

'She could not hold too high an one,' said Rushton earnestly. 'You do not know her, sir, how good she is, and how true. She has led a difficult and laborious life hitherto, one totally unfitted to her birth, for she is the daughter of an officer in the Royal Navy; but, please God, I shall change all that for her, and she shall live in ease and comfort, if not in luxury.'

'Well, I wish you joy, Rushton, and so does Mrs Measures, and you may rest assured we shall continue to be amongst your best friends. When is the marriage to take place?'

'The last week in August, sir, and I hope to bring her home early in September. But I must have the old place painted and done up a little first, as well as partially refurnished; and I thought (I trust I am not presumptuous), but I hoped—'

'Well, man, out with it!' cried the vicar, laughing.

'That Mrs Measures might be so good as to give me the benefit of her advice,' replied Hal, stammering. 'I know nothing about such things, you see, and I am not acquainted with a lady beside herself.'

'My dear Mr Rushton, I shall be delighted,' said the vicar's wife. 'You know it is quite an excitement to a woman to choose pretty things. You shall drive me over to Haltham, and we will turn Snoad's shop over from top to bottom. But you must promise me one thing in return. That when Paula is Mrs Rushton, you will bring her to stay for a week at the vicarage, before she goes home to Highbridge Farm. Now, I will take no excuse, and I must insist upon it for her

sake. I know you do not care for what people say; but you must remember that Paula is coming to live her life amongst us, and it is just as well to have a good name with our neighbours. Let her come to me, and then it will little signify what such canting hypocrites as Gribble and Axworthy may say.'

'My dear, my dear, remember you are speaking of my churchwardens,' remonstrated Mr Measures.

'I don't care who or what they are, Edward. I repeat that they are a pair of canting hypocrites. Mr Rushton, I am waiting for your answer.'

'I cannot refuse your offer, Mrs Measures. It is too kindly meant, and I am quite aware of what a benefit your friendship will be to Paula. And so if *she* is agreeable to the plan, so am I.'

'Oh, I know Miss Stafford will come to me,' replied Mrs Measures gaily, 'for we are the best of friends already, and I am quite glad to think I shall have her for a companion in this stupid place. But what are you going to do about your stepmother?'

'That is the real reason that I came to tell Mr Measures my news before anybody else,' said Hal Rushton, 'because I am so anxious to have his advice about Mrs Snaley and her son. Of course they cannot remain at Highbridge. That is quite out of the question. It did not signify for myself, but I would not have my dar—I mean my wife's eyes and ears polluted with the sight and sound of that woman for anything But I wish to do what is fair by her. She was my father's wife, and I have let her occupy my house for several years, so there must be no scandal about it. You know all the circumstances of the marriage, Mr Measures, and so I am sure you are the best person to advise me. You know that eight-roomed cottage and garden near where the old farm stood, Wavertree Cottage they call it. It has been vacant since Lady-day, and I propose to let my stepmother have it rent free for her lifetime, and with her own income I think she ought to be able to manage to live very comfortably for her station in life.'

'I am *sure* she ought,' replied the vicar, 'and

the offer is a generous one, Hal, for you can let that cottage and ground for forty pounds a year. Ted Snaley should be able to make some money out of the garden, too. It contains some fine fruit trees. I can imagine nothing more suitable than their settling there.'

'I shall furnish it for them from the farm,' continued Hal, 'and, of course, set them going with poultry; and, perhaps, a cow. I should not like to do anything mean or unfair by her, since she has kept my house for me so long.'

'And considerably to her own advantage, I should say,' replied Mr Measures. 'However, you need not be afraid of being mean, Hal. I consider your proposal most generous, and more than is required of you. You have not broached the subject to Mrs Rushton yet?'

'Oh, no, sir. I waited until I should be sure that you thought I was acting right. But I shall delay no further now, for the sooner the house is empty the better. There is another thing I wished to ask you about, though. Highbridge Farm was known as Highbridge Hall when my

poor mother brought it to my father as a marriage portion. It was *he* who changed the name. I have a fancy for restoring its original appellation, and, particularly, as I am no longer dependent on the farm for a livelihood. Do you think I have a right to do so, Mr Measures?'

'Every right, my dear fellow, and every reason also, now that you are bringing a lady home to live in it. Your mother was a lady, Hal, every inch of her—sweet, gentle Edith Hereford (you will forgive me for saying I often wondered how she could ever have married your rough, outspoken father)—and if your wife follows in her footsteps, you will have gained a treasure.'

'I believe I have, sir; in fact, I'm *sure* I have,' replied Hal, and then, as though ashamed of having betrayed so much of his feelings, he added hurriedly: 'Well, then, the old place is to be Highbridge Hall once more, and I shall get Collett to paint it up on the drive gates. I suppose Deepdale will say I am "holding my head high." Well, so I am, and so I ought to, with such a prospect before me. I will go now,

Mrs Measures. I have intruded on you too long already.'

'Not at all, Mr Rushton. I feel almost as excited as you do about all this, and as anxious that everything should go well. Let me know when you are ready to choose your carpets and curtains, and we will drive into Haltham together.'

They then took a friendly leave of the young man, and Hal Rushton walked back to his own domains. But not without leaving, as in most cases, his character behind him.

'I *hope*,' said Mr Measures, with a long stress on the word, 'I *hope* that poor boy is choosing wisely.'

'What do you mean, Edward?' exclaimed his wife. 'How could he have chosen better? I consider Miss Stafford one of the prettiest girls I have ever seen, and quite a lady. I was astonished from the first to meet so refined and intelligent a companion in a village schoolmistress. But she had evidently come down in the world, poor thing!'

'My dear Mary, I don't deny her beauty, nor her refinement. But there is always something suspicious in a gentlewoman "coming down," as you call it. Hal Rushton says she is the daughter of a naval officer, but what does he know of her antecedents. She is not quite a girl, remember. She must be five or six-and-twenty. And yet I think she told me this was her first situation. What had she been doing before?'

'My dear Edward, I think you are both ungenerous and uncharitable,' replied Mrs Measures warmly. 'Why need she have done anything before? How can you tell what trouble or disappointment drove her to occupation as a distraction to her mind? Why need we make a mystery out of such a very simple thing? Mr Gribble engaged her, and I conclude he did not do so without a satisfactory character.'

'He had references from the high school from which she obtained her certificate, of course.'

'Then what more is necessary. Oh, I do hate these petty doubts and surmises,' cried Mrs

Measures impatiently. 'You didn't ask for a history of *my* antecedents before you married me, Edward. Why should Hal Rushton demand more with *his* wife?'

'My dear, you had lived close to your mother's side all your life. There was no necessity to ask such a question of you.'

'And Paula may have lived close to that of her mother until she came to this tattling, back-biting little place. Surely you may give the poor girl the benefit of the doubt.'

'Mary, I should never have raised the question had it not been for the unfortunate circumstance which caused Miss Stafford to leave Deepdale. I have never been quite satisfied about that, my dear. She had certainly something to conceal. What could have been easier for her than to tell the name and business of her visitor, yet she obstinately withheld both. I was sorry for it before, and now that she is to be Hal Rushton's wife, I am more sorry still.'

'Well, *he* is satisfied evidently, so I don't see that we have any cause to complain. You

heard him say that there were no secrets between them.'

'Hal is in love, Mary, and men in love are so eager to secure what they covet that they will neglect their best interests to do so. We see that occur every day. But at the same time he possesses a proud and jealous nature, and if his wife should be as reticent with him as she was with us, I shall tremble for their married happiness.'

'Well, let us hope she will *not* be,' said Mrs Measures shortly. She had not forgotten the interview she had held with Paula in the schoolhouse, nor the partial revelations then made to her, but she had pitied the poor girl far more than she had censured her, and she had never told the vicar what passed between them. Even the best of wives are not always entirely open with their lords and masters, and silence is sometimes a greater virtue than candour. And having kept her counsel so far, Mrs Measure had no intention of revealing it now. She felt that the less said about the past the better. So she tossed her usually meek little

head, and continued: 'For my own part, I see no reason why they should not be happy, and I sincerely hope they may be.'

'And so do I,' replied the vicar, 'though I am afraid Miss Stafford will find it uphill work to get on friendly terms with her neighbours.'

'What! when she is the mistress of Highbridge Hall? Don't you believe it, Edward. They will all be ready to bow the knee to her, and I only hope she will keep them at a distance. I for one shall be her friend to the end. I promised her so, and I shall keep my promise.'

'And I shall be the last person to prevent your doing so,' said Mr Measures kindly. But he was a very upright man, and not one to forget easily, and so Paula always remained, more or less, an object of suspicion to him.

Meanwhile Hal was 'making tracks' for Highbridge Hall. His heart was light as a feather, but his heels moved somewhat slowly, for he was determined to break the news of his coming marriage to Mrs Rushton that very evening, and he felt much as though he were walking

up to the scaffold. How lovely the old place looked in the parting rays of the August sun. He was so used to his home that he had not often observed its beauties, but now his changed prospects made him regard everything with a different eye. A warm glow made the dull red brick of which the house was composed flame like fire, and brought out all the delicate tracery of clinging leaves and tendrils to perfection. A heavy scent pervaded the air—the scent of the fallen rose leaves with which the large smooth-shaven lawn was laden. Hal gave a quick sigh as he noticed how rapidly the roses were fading, but it was followed by a smile as he thought of his pet name for Paula.

'My White Rose,' he said softly, 'who will be always by my side, both in summer and winter. What will seasons matter to us then? We shall always have sunshine in our faces and our hearts. My sweet flower! The old Hall will look as it has never done before when her figure is flitting about from room to room. Why should I feel so awkward about telling Mrs

Rushton the truth? I am my own master, and this house is mine. I will stand upon my rights, and tell her at once what I intend to do.'

The sight which met his eyes on entering the dining-room furthered his resolution. The tea was on the table, and though the meal was sufficiently plentiful, there was a want of refinement in its serving, and the manner in which the widow and her son partook of it, that offended his more sensitive nature.

'Do we only possess one knife?' he inquired caustically, as he sunk into a chair, 'that Ted is obliged to cut the bread-and-butter with his own? Really, Mrs Rushton, I think you might teach him better manners. It is not everyone who would care to eat after him.'

'Hoity toity! here's a fuss about nothing,' exclaimed the widow; 'one would think you was a lord, at the very least. What's the matter with my poor lad, I wonder, that he mayn't do as he likes with his own knife? You've been away on your holiday, without even saying as much as "by your leave" or "with your leave," and I

should think you might let us have a bit of peace now you're come home.'

This speech nettled Hal, and gave his courage the fillip it required. He answered quickly,—

'Well, he'll soon be able to do as he likes in every particular, and you too, for I'm going to make changes at Highbridge Farm.'

'Changes. What sort of changes? You can't paper and paint this year, if that's what you're thinking of, for I've made no arrangements for going away, and the smell of fresh paint always made me ill from a child.'

'You'll have to make arrangements, Mrs Rushton, and very quickly too, for I am not only going to paper and paint, but to bring a new mistress into the house into the bargain.'

Mrs Rushton dropped the teapot on to the tray with a bang.

'A new missus! Do you mean you're going to be such a fool as to marry?'

'Just so; but I shall be obliged if you will moderate your expressions. I don't take kindly to being called names. I am going to be married

on the twenty-eighth of this month, and you will have anticipated me that, under such circumstances, we cannot all continue to live under the same roof.'

'You're going to turn us out of the farm?' ejaculated the widow. 'For two years I sacrificed my life to your old father, a-making of all his messes, and waiting on him like a slave, and he rewarded me by breaking his promises at the last, and telling lies on his very deathbed. But being a forgiving nature, I kept on house for you. It's seven years since your father died, Hal Rushton, and left me to "do" for you—and what you would have done without a notable body to look after things *I* don't know—and now you want to turn me out neck and crop, like a dog, and to put a fine madam over my head. But there's law for sich wrongs and I'll have it, as sure my name's Eliza,' and the widow stuck her arms akimbo and looked very ferocious.

'Look here Mrs Snaley—' commenced Hal.

'Don't you dare to call me out of my name, sir.

Snaley was a good man, and a good 'usband, but he's in Heaven, and my name is Mrs 'Enery Rushton. I am your father's widdy, sir, and *your* mother. Don't you forget that.'

'You are *not* my mother,' cried Hal hotly. 'You are only a herdsman's widow, whom my father was foolish enough to put in her place. Don't attempt to threaten me, please, or this interview may end very unpleasantly. I acknowledge you have kept house for me at Highbridge for the last seven years, but that is no reason it should go on for ever. Since I am going to be married, it *cannot* go on. My wife must have her house to herself. And I wish the change to take place as soon as possible.'

'And pray where do you expect me and my Ted to go? To the work'us?'

'That is absurd, Mrs Rushton. You have your life allowance of a hundred a year, and I intend, in addition, to give you Wavertree Cottage rent free.'

'*Wavertree Cottage!*' cried the widow shrilly. 'A tumbledown 'ouse, with only eight rooms in

it, and when the farm has twenty. 'Ere's gratitoode for you! Why don't you send us to one of your labourer's tenements at once? Wavertree Cottage, indeed! I refuses to go into it.'

Hal lost patience with her.

'Well, then, you can provide yourself with a residence. There was nothing said in my father's will about giving you a house, and since the cottage is not good enough for you, I will let it to someone else. It is worth forty pounds a year, and Mr Measures said it was a generous offer on my part.'

The widow perceived she had gone too far, and might be left at a disadvantage, so she threw her apron over her head and resorted to lamentation.

'I never thought I should live to see this day,' she wailed. 'To be turned out of the 'ouse, where my word was law, and to 'ave to stoop to a cottage. 'Tisn't what I was led to expect when I married your father—and a good wife I was to him for two long years, making his poultices, and sitting up night and day to minister

to his comforts—and this is the hend of it, to be turned out of my own 'ouse, with my poor suffering son, by those as I've benefited.'

'You mistake, Mrs Rushton,' said Hal quietly. 'This house is *mine*, as it was my mother's before me. There is no injustice in the matter at all, and it is only what you might have expected — that some day I should marry and require it to myself. If you refuse to accept my offer of Wavertree Cottage—'

'Oh, I'll accept it, sir, I'll accept it! I should be a-wronging myself to decline. It's little enough, after all I've done and suffered. But you must put it in proper repair.'

'I will engage to see it papered and painted, and you can choose what furniture you like from the Hall to make it comfortable. It is a pretty little place, you know, and Ted ought to keep the garden in beautiful order for you. Many a dowager would think herself well off with such a home to go to.'

'Ah, well, the furniture is the least as you could do for me,' said the widow, drying her

tears; 'and I suppose I may take some of my pigs and my poultry with me? 'Twould be very 'ard to grudge me the poultry as I've reared with my own 'ands.'

'We will see about the pigs and poultry afterwards,' replied Hal, amused at her demands.

'And what are we to do for milk, I should like to know?'

'You can have all the milk you require from the farm. I thought of giving you a cow, but I think it would prove more expense than profit.'

'Oh, but I should like to have a cow,' said Mrs Rushton; 'and what about my phee-aton, Hal—the phee-aton you father give me when I married him, and a 'orse for it? You don't expect me, I hope, to go walking about at my time of life, after having ridden in my carriage for nigh ten years.'

Hal shook his head.

'I must draw a line at the phaeton, Mrs Rushton You forget, I am not a rich man. Eight hundred a year will not keep up two places like Highbridge Hall. I hope to keep a little carriage for my

wife, but my means will not run further than that.'

Mrs Rushton relapsed into insolence.

'Oh, of course, madam will 'ave everything, carriages and 'orses and what not, and you with your two 'unters in the stables eating their 'eads off, whilst your poor father's widdy may walk, wet or shine. But mark my words, Hal Rushton. No good will come of sich doings, and so I warns you.'

'Come, come, I can't stand any more of this nonsense,' said Hal impatiently, as he rose from the table; 'you know my intentions now, and my wishes, and you must abide by them. Collett shall be put into the cottage to-morrow morning, and in a couple of days it will be ready for you. Meantime you had better have a look round and tell me what articles of furniture you would like to take with you. I hope to bring my wife home early in September, and so you must see the necessity of dispatch.'

'*Your wife*,' sighed the widow, 'well, well, times *do* alter, to be sure. But it's little I ever

thought as a wife, or hanythink, would turn *me* out of Highbridge Farm.'

'What's her name?' demanded Ted Snaley, speaking for the first time.

'Aye, *who* is she?' echoed his mother. 'Why, you've never as much as told us the name of the gal as you're treating your own flesh and blood so cruel for.'

'Her name is Miss Stafford,' replied Hal curtly, as he left the room.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS GRIBBLE'S TEA-PARTY.

A FEW days after this interview a tea-party was assembled at the house of Mr Gribble. A rumour of the impending marriage of Hal Rushton with the late 'school teacher' had circulated Deepdale, and the inhabitants were eager and curious to ascertain the truth, and learn all particulars concerning it. The widow and her son had therefore been invited with much ceremony to spend the evening with the churchwarden and his wife, and all the principal scandalmongers of the place were asked to meet them. There were present Mr and Mrs Axworthy, of course, and old Miss Foker, who was supposed to have seen 'better days.' Mrs M'Causland, the widow of a dis-

senting minister, and Mr Rohan, the miller, who passed as a very godly man, completed the circle, not forgetting, of course, ferrety-eyed Mr Gribble and his portly spouse, who sat at the head of her tea-table, perspiring in a plum-coloured merino dress, which made her complexion look like a boiled beetroot. Carrie and Lottie, her two sweet children, were also present, with their hair violently oiled and tied with red ribbons, but their hands and faces innocent of soap and water. They were as excited as the rest of the party, as their mamma had particularly urged them to recall every incident they could relative to the famous visit to Haltham, for the benefit of their guests, and they looked forward to the repetition much as other children would to a show performance on the piano or violin. When Mrs Rushton entered, clad in her rusty widow's weeds, appealing to the sympathy of her audience by tottering feebly as though she had no strength to walk, and followed by her sandy-haired and freckled son, she was received much as she would have been had she sustained some crushing misfortune

by death or otherwise. Mr Gribble conducted her to a chair, and Mrs Axworthy assisted her to remove her shawl and dispose of her umbrella.

'Now, don't you say a word, poor dear, till you've 'ad a cup of good 'ot tea,' exclaimed Mrs Gribble sympathetically. 'This is a terrible trial for you, to be sure, but it's only what one might have expected from a 'ot-'eaded and wrong-minded young man like 'Al Rushton. Mr Snaley, sir, pray find yourself a seat. I 'ope I see you well, though this horful business must be quite a turn up for you as well as for your poor ma.'

'Ah, my poor lad,' murmured the widow, 'I feels it more for him than for myself. His step-pa wouldn't have be'aved so cruel to him, Mrs Gribble. He meant my Ted to have hevery-think, and so he would if it 'adn't been for un-justifiable hinterference. I know my dooty, Mr Gribble, and yours, and so I mention no names, and make no hinferences. Still, I can't help feeling that my poor dear 'usband's real wishes were not executed, and that he must be a-looking

down on all this with eyes of spurn and displeasure.'

'Well, you mustn't think about that now, but 'ope he don't see nothing of it,' replied Mrs Gribble consolingly. 'Here's your tea, Mrs Rushton, and 'ope it's to your liking, my dear—milk and sugar?—and when you're a bit refreshed, you must tell us all you know about this unholy marriage.'

'Marriage, indeed,' quoth little Miss Foker, 'I'm sure *I* shall never call it a marriage, after the shocking things I've heard took place in the schoolhouse.'

'There can't be no blessing upon it,' added Mr Gribble, 'and I'm thankful it ain't to take place in Deepdale. But just to fancy that young woman coming back here! I wonder she has the face to do it—*she*, whom we didn't count worthy to teach our dear children. And now presuming to place herself atop of us all, as it were, and reigning at Highbridge Farm.'

'Oh, it ain't to be a *farm* no longer, Mr Gribble,' said Ted Snaley, with an unpleasant sneer. 'The

lady's too fine and mighty to come to a farm. It's to be called "'Ighbridge 'All." Hal has had it painted up in white letters right across the drive gates. Miss Stafford is to be the lady of "'Ighbridge 'All."'

'Redikerlous!' exclaimed Mr Gribble, 'whilst we is content to live in a viller. Well, pride has a fall, they say, and Mr and Mrs Hal Rushton ain't seen the last of the scandal yet, perhaps.'

'What has become of the gentleman who was known to visit at the schoolhouse? Has he never appeared again?' inquired Mrs M'Causland.

'Ma! ma!' cried Carrie Gribble, tugging at her mother's skirts, 'is that the man with the beard?'

'Yes, lovey; but wait a bit. You shall tell the ladies all you know afterwards. But lor', Mrs M'Causland, is it likely he would have appeared again? *She* gave 'im good notice of what followed his visit, you may depend on that. But I wonder what he'll say when he hears as she's Mrs Rushton. Perhaps he will come back then and 'ave a row.'

'Have you moved into the cottage yet, ma'am?' inquired the churchwarden of the widow.

'Oh, yes, Mr Gribble, and what a change. It's cruel. Here am I, who have been mistress of the farm for so many years, degraded to a eight-roomed 'ouse. I'm sure I've near cried myself blind since I hentered it. It looks so mean. And only the old furniture, too. Not one stick of noo has he put into it.'

'And you should see the noo things at the 'All,' interrupted Ted Snaley; 'all the carpets and curtains come from Snoad's, though they ain't put up yet on account of the paint. Collett is doing the parlour all in blue and white, and the best parlour in buff, and heverythink is to match. And there's a pianner, and a new sofa, and brass pots to put flowers in, and I can't say what. And the vicar's wife is arranging it all with Hal, and she's been twice into Haltham with 'im.'

'*What!*' cried the assembled company. 'Do you mean Mrs Measures?'

'Of course. She and 'Al is as thick as thieves.'

Mr Gribble cast his eyes upwards.

'Oh, I am grieved to 'ear this,' he said, 'I am grieved to 'ear this. I thought as Mr Measures would have seen things with clearer heyes.'

'Lor'! Mr Gribble, ain't he always been on 'Al's side?' exclaimed the widow. 'Didn't he stand by my poor dear 'usband's dying bed and threaten 'im till he was that weak and frightened he altered his will. Heverything had been left to me, sir—*heverything*. And just see me now. 'Al *did* say at one time (and my son Edward can bear me out) that his stepbrother shouldn't suffer by the injustice. He said he shouldn't never marry, and Ted would come into it if he died. And now his wedding day's fixed for the twenty-eighth of this month. Oh, the wanity of human 'opes.'

'But how did it all happen?' asked Miss Foker. 'Mr Rushton appears to have been very sly about the matter. Was this settled before Miss Stafford left Deepdale?'

'Oh, I expect so, ma'am, though he never said a word to *me* about it.'

'But anyone could see he was sweet on her, mother,' said Ted Snaley. 'I've told you scores o' times how I catched 'im sneaking in or out of the schoolhouse door.'

'But, whatever his previous intentions may have been, one would have thought he would have abandoned them as soon as he 'eard the shocking scandal about the young woman, and on such good authority as Mr Gribble's,' interposed Mrs Gribble. 'If he'd 'ad any right feeling, he would have dropped 'er like a 'ot pertater. He must be as habandoned as herself.'

'It is incomprehensible,' said her husband; but thank 'Evin we *can't* understand it. Sich ways is noo and strange to us. We've been reared respectable and pure, Mrs Rushton. No one has never been able to say a word against my good lady there, nor yet against myself. We can 'old up our 'eads with the best, and it's a trial to think that such as Miss Stafford is to ride over us roughshod.'

'Oh, but we mustn't let her do it,' exclaimed Mrs Axworthy; 'we must put her in her proper place at once, and just show her what we think of her. The hussy!'

But Mr Axworthy stooped down and whispered a caution in his wife's ear.

'Aye, what's that?' she said sharply. 'It *can't* be true. Mrs Rushton, ma'am, Mr Axworthy says that your stepson and this young woman are invited to stay the first week at the vicarage. But he must be mistook. Mrs Measures would never demean herself so.'

The widow shook her head sorrowfully.

'He ain't mistook, Mrs Axworthy. What Deepdale's a-coming to I can't say, but the vicar and his lady seem to set themselves against all the godly souls in the place, and take up with the castaways. They *is* a-going to the vicarage as soon as they return from their wedding trip.'

'But has Mr Hal seen Miss Stafford since she left Deepdale?' inquired Mrs M'Causland.

'Oh, yes, ma'am. He's been down to her 'ouse in Devonshire, though 'e's very close as to what

he see there. He don't tell me nor my poor Ted nothing, except as we were to turn out of the 'ouse at a moment's notice, and go to Wavertree Cottage. Which I'm sure it's damp, for I've felt the rhoomatics all over me ever since I entered it. And fancy *me* ma'am, who's ridden in my carriage for the last ten year, 'aving to walk for the rest of my days. It seems as if the Lord was bent upon trying me.'

'But you have your phee-aton, Mrs Rushton, sure*ly?*' exclaimed Mrs Gribble.

'Oh, no, ma'am, I haven't. The phee-aton's not mine, nor the 'orse, nor nothing. My step-son's took good care to make me understand *that.* His madam is to have a noo carriage, and my phee-aton is to be sold, and she will kick the dust up in my face as she rolls by whilst I am tramping on the pathway.'

And thereupon Mrs Rushton produced a very dirty pocket-handkerchief, and rubbed her nose up with it violently.

'Poor, dear soul,' cried the ladies simultaneously. 'It is a trial, indeed. But perhaps

there'll be a way out of it. He ain't married yet, remember, and there may come something to prevent it. Or she may die, 'Evin's ways is so mysterious, and then Mr 'Al's heyes will be opened to the wickedness she has committed.'

'Oh, I've no 'ope of that,' said Mrs Rushton mournfully.

'But if they *are* married,' interposed Mr Gribble, 'they mayn't keep together. A flighty school teacher will make a flighty wife, and Mr Hal, if I'm not mistook, will have cause to regret his rashness in marrying Miss Stafford. We mayn't 'ave seen the last of the man with the beard.'

'Oh, ma, mayn't we tell what we seed in Haltham now? You said we might,' urged Lottie.

'Well, love, if you like. I don't keep nothink of this from my little gals,' continued Mrs Gribble, to the assembled company, 'for they can't learn too soon to 'ate and abhor such goings on.'

'And we was in Haltham with teacher on market day,' exclaimed both the youngsters in a breath, 'and when we was in Mr Spring's shop a big man with a black beard came in

and he kissed teacher, and he says, "Hullo, my dear," and she says, "Oh, don't, afore the children," and he says, "Yes, I will," and she says, "Come and see me to-night at Deepdale,"' and then the little liars stopped for a moment and glanced for approbation at their plum-coloured mamma.

'Oh, shocking! terrible! To think the dear lambs were exposed to the horrors of such infamy!' exclaimed the whole party.

'Yes, ladies,' said churchwarden Gribble, 'and *that* is the sort of teaching *all* our dear lambs would have been subjected to had I not stood up like a lion and exposed her. I have suffered for it, ladies, I may say considerably suffered in the estimation of the vicar and Mrs Measures, I can see that plainly. And yet I do not repent of my courage, but am willing to be a martyr in such a cause.'

'Grand!' 'Noble!' 'Self-sacrificing!' were amongst the murmured comments that went round the little room.

'But tell us what we are to do now, dear Mr

Gribble,' asked Mrs Axworthy. 'How must we behave to this young woman on her return to Deepdale? Must we ask her to join our respectable parties, mix with our innocent children, associate with ourselves? Why, not a gentleman in the village will be safe from her machinations.'

'Ah! ladies, Mrs Axworthy has started a delicate question. It's a 'ard matter for a churchwarden to set up to judge his vicar. If Mr and Mrs Measures hinsists upon patronising Mrs Hal Rushton, I don't see how we can go for to "cut" her. I would do the genteel, ladies, in deference to the vicar, but I would draw the line there. I wouldn't 'ave her mingle with *my* wife and little 'uns for anythink. And you must all judge likewise for yourselves—'

'Oh! *I* sha'n't ask 'er to *my* 'ouse,' and 'She'll see by my heye what *I* think of 'er,' were amongst the free comments passed on the churchwarden's address.

'I 'ope she won't come 'ere,' said Carrie Gribble, 'for I 'ate 'er. Lottie and me, we like Miss Brown, our new teacher ever so much better nor

Miss Stafford. Miss Brown kisses us, and calls us "dear," and ain't 'alf so pertikerler over our books and our playtime. We likes Miss Brown awful.'

'Dear little creatures!' said Mrs Axworthy. 'It's just the same with my Laura and Sophia. They're twice as 'appy as they was, poor dears.'

At this juncture, all the tea and cake having been disposed of, and Mrs Rushton having told what she knew concerning Hal Rushton's intended marriage, the party began to think of going home.

'Now, don't you despond, there's a dear,' were Mrs Gribble's parting words to the widow, 'for there's no saying 'ow things may turn out, nor if you mayn't find yourselves at the farm again before long. Lor'! what should a gal like that know of 'ousekeeping? It don't look a 'opeful prospeck to *me*, that I can tell you. You keep your mouth shut, ma'am, and your eyes open, and if you don't find out something queer before long I shall be astonished. Good-night!'

As Ted Snaley limped home by his mother's

side, he turned his little, evil-looking green eyes up in the moonlight, and reverted to these words.

'She's right, mother, Mrs Gribble is. "Keep your mouth shut, and your eyes open, and you'll find out something queer afore long." I sha'n't forget them words. I shall watch Mrs 'Al like a ferret at a rabbit's 'ole, till I catch her tripping again. They never does it only *once*, mother. And then, if 'Al finds her out too, who knows if he mayn't go back to his old word, and leave some of the property to me.'

'Oh, my lad, she'll be too deep for that. She'll keep in now she's got in. But there are other ways, Ted—there are other ways. Only, you must mind one thing. You mustn't quarrel with your step-brother, or it'll be all up a tree with us. We must speak fair to both on 'em, and keep our footing at the 'All. There's many a thing will find its way down from there to here, if we play our cards well. We shall get nothing by showing our 'ands. For whatever Hal may think afterwards, he'll be just bound up in 'er at first, and ready to quarrel with

anyone that's agen her, and especially as so many of 'em will be. So let you and I fall in with the vicar and his wife, and seem to be friendly. Do you 'ear me?'

'All right, mother.'

'It's a terrible come down,' sighed the widow, as she opened the garden gate of Wavertree Cottage and realised there was no servant to meet her at the door and take her orders, 'but it's no use our making of it worse. 'It's a good thing I've got a little money laid by in the bank for you, Teddy, in case I go first, for there'll be no more saving now. But there's six hundred pounds there safe enough. That's not bad for ten years' savings when its had to be scraped out of the vittles. Ah, well, there's no saying, after all, what may come to pass. Fetch me the matches off the chimbley-piece, my boy, and light the lamp, and we'll 'ave a bit of bread and bacon and a drop o' beer afore we goes to bed.'

END OF VOL. I.

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